

THE SIMPLE WAY OF POISON

About this book

The marriage of Juliet to Jocelyn Waring, an Oxford don, wore the bright look of a love match, although at least a few of the young couple's intimate friends entertained serious doubts about how long it would last. Juliet was a successful novelist whose books, far from being as academic as those of her husband, nevertheless helped them to keep comfortably off, and for this Jocelyn never forgave her.

The young wife, though, was generous in spirit and always indulgent until the day she discovered that everybody was aware of her husband's infidelities except herself. With the wreck of her happiness came Jocelyn's murder by poisoning, a bizarre affair which Superintendent William Austen found as challenging as any he had ever investigated.

Full marks for Anne Hocking—at the top of her form in this newest and most intriguing of her detective novels.

By the same author

AT THE "CEDARS"
PRUSSIAN BLUE
DEATH AT THE WEDDING
THE VULTURES GATHER
NILE GREEN
SIX GREEN BOTTLES
ONE SHALL BE TAKEN
MISS MALVERTON
NIGHT'S CANDLES
THE WICKED FLEE
OLD MRS. FITZGERALD
SO MANY DOORS
ILL DEEDS DONE
THE LITTLE VICTIMS AT PLAY
DEATH DISTURBS MR. JEFFERSON
MEDITERRANEAN MURDER
THERE'S DEATH IN THE CUP
BEST LAID PLANS
THE EVIL THAT MEN DO
DEATH AMONG THE TULIPS
AND NO ONE WEPT
POISON IN PARADISE
A REASON FOR MURDER
MURDER AT MID-DAY

Anne Hocking

THE SIMPLE WAY
OF POISON

"I love the old way best, the simple way of poison"—

The Medea of Euripides.



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON

For
Anne, Peter, Alastair and Fionna
Mackenzie
and all at the Palazzo Castiglione
Naples

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CHAPTER ONE

WHEN Juliet Stewart and Jocelyn Waring announced their engagement, Ancestral Voices Prophesied War in quite a big way.

"What!" they exclaimed, in close harmony, "Two writers marrying each other? Absurd! Impossible! Fatal!" The most optimistic thought that it might last eighteen months if she were sufficiently in love with him to take his temperament. Others opined that unless they got married within a month, they never would. She would find out, they said ominously, how difficult he really was. There was another school of thought altogether, which believed that Jocelyn would never be able to stand Juliet. After all, she had been a successful novelist for several years and her habits of work must, by now, be well established. Jocelyn wouldn't be able to put up with that.

Well, as it happened, they were all wrong. The Warings lived together in amity, peace, comfort—and prosperity—for several years.

Probably where people made their mistake was in assuming that Authors must, of necessity be intense. They used the word temperament—in mental capital letters of course, without any clear idea of its meaning or its effect in action. As interpreted by them it connoted temper, jeal-

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ousy, selfishness and irresponsibility, and though, of course, it can produce all those manifestations, it doesn't have to and, unless deliberately given way to and deliberately exploited, rarely does.

The more experienced and intelligent of the Warings' friends thought that they recognized that. They said: "Jocelyn is so completely absorbed in his work that he never notices what goes on around him"—not realising that that is a form of selfishness.

They said: "Of course Juliet has been treated by her parents as if she were almost too marvellous to live, but she's very sweet tempered, and of course she'll make allowances for Jocelyn. His work is so much more important than hers."

They also said: "Well of course, neither of them is very young and they ought to have learned to make allowances, and so long as Juliet recognizes how much more important his work is than hers, it might turn out all right."

Well, Juliet did recognize just that. She made a great deal more money than Jocelyn, but that, in her eyes, was only important in so far as it enabled him to do the work he wanted and live as he wished to live. The recognition even gave her, without her knowing it, a certain sense of inferiority—quite without cause, for her books, in their own genre, were of as high a standard as his in theirs. Her's were first class detective novels, written in beautiful English, with a brilliant sense of character, and the brain power which went to their working out was very considerable indeed. She was one of the authors who helped to raise and keep the

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detective novel, in a class which commands respect as a psychological study, as opposed to what is loosely called a "thriller".

It was sheer luck which had started her writing—bad luck which had turned to good. A car accident had resulted in a long and boring convalescence; months of immobility during which she had felt perfectly well but wasn't allowed to walk a step.

She suffered all the miseries which active people do when suddenly deprived of an outlet for their energies. She had an eager mind, too, accustomed to being exercised, for she had only just come down from Cambridge after taking her degree.

She wasn't fond of needlework; cross-word puzzles and Patience palled and she could never get enough books to read. She enjoyed detective novels and the idea came to her of trying to write one.

She found it an absorbing way of passing the time and a mental exercise which kept her brain fully extended. She hadn't realised that it would be so difficult, nor so fascinating.

Time no longer hung on her hands. The days flew, and having nothing else in the world to do, she soon finished her book, and when she read it through she decided it wasn't at all too bad. In fact she was pleasingly surprised at what she had achieved, and gave it to her father, also a detective novel addict, for his opinion.

Ian Stewart wasn't an easy man to please. He was highly critical and his judgment was excellent. He wrote, himself, polished, leisurely and extremely erudite essays on men and letters.

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He read his daughter's book quite dispassionately, with no bias in its favour because she had written it.

When he'd finished it, he said: "This is good, Juliet. Of course, it's amateurish in parts, but it comes off and you'll do better next time. I think it should sell."

"Sell?" she cried in surprise. "Do you mean that anyone would publish it?"

"I shall be very surprised if no one does, my child. There are one or two places where it must be tightened up before you submit it, and, of course, you can't expect much in the way of terms to start with, but I'm sure that someone will accept it."

He was right, of course. She did what he told her, sent the book to the publisher he recommended and it was accepted, and for a first novel by an unknown writer, it didn't sell too badly.

She wrote another and another, gaining experience and expertise each time, and gradually her popularity increased, her sales rose and she became an established author.

Old Ian Stewart was very proud of her, though he never spared his criticisms. She was his only child, and he had always hoped, though wisely, never said, that she would write. If this were the medium in which she could work best, good luck to her, he felt, so long as she wrote well.

She continued to do that, and, by the time that she met Jocelyn Waring, when she was in her late twenties, her name was a good deal better known to the general public than his.

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Luck had taken no part in Jocelyn's career. His success had been attained by sheer hard work. He had had the advantage of a brilliant brain and a determination to put it to good use. He was ambitious, dogged and quite ruthless. He recognized his own abilities and was going to see to it that other people did too and that he obtained the rewards which he felt they merited.

He was very lucky in having parents who believed in him and were prepared to make sacrifices to help him, and he made no effort to stop their doing so.

He went from success to success with never a set-back. Scholarships fell into his industrious hands.

He got a scholarship to Cambridge a year earlier than normal and got a first in both parts of the Tripos.

After a successful war in which he became a Staff Officer, he was appointed a fellow of Leycester College, at Oxford, and lectured on the Development of English Drama. His personal charm, his discernment as a lecturer and the clarity of his style, soon made these lectures extremely popular.

Through this success, taken in conjunction with his published research work, he was appointed to the Chair of Drama, a good many years before he could normally have attained such a distinction. This, naturally, did not endear him to his rivals.

At the time when he and Juliet met, he had recently published his first book.

It had been a succès d'estime. The critics, as one man, had called it brilliant and praised it to the skies. Scholars had, more gravely, recommended it, people had talked about it but hardly anyone bought it. It was emphatically not a book

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for the general public, but for the discriminating few who were interested in the subject. *

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Their first encounter was at a cocktail party given by one of Ian Stewart's many academic friends in Oxford. Afterwards she was amused to think how very nearly she had not gone to that party, for her mother hadn't been well and Juliet had wanted to stay at home with her.

However, she had been over-persuaded and the die was cast.

In the course of the evening her father brought Jocelyn up to her.

"Juliet," he said, "I want to introduce Jocelyn Waring to you—the author of *The Restoration Dramatists as a Social Force*, which you enjoyed so much."

After that it was all inevitable. As Shakespeare said about a very different pair, they "no sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they loved." The attraction was instantaneous; the end in sight.

Juliet was looking her best that evening, and her best was good.

She never was or had been pretty, but she had poise and charm and the kind of face which has something that outlasts mere prettiness.

She was tall and slim, and her hair was a shining chestnut, her eyes the greenish-blue which sometimes goes with that. She had the high cheekbones and almost translucent skin of her Cornish mother, and a sweet and tender mouth. She looked, as she was, highly intelligent and Jocelyn recog-

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nized that at once. Anyway, she had read and appreciated his book, so she must be!

He was, by any standard, a good-looking man, tall and broad, with large, deep brown eyes and dark brown hair with a slight wave in it. He had the kind of face which is sometimes described as "hawk-like" and it looked best in profile. His voice was deep and resonant and he had all the charm in the world and knew it, even then.

He knew, of course, who Juliet was and that she was a novelist—Oxford academic circles are small and concentric and know all about each other—but he hadn't read any of her books. It was one of his affectations that he "never read novels."

However, he didn't let that stop him. He told her how he admired her work and she told him, genuinely, how she admired his and then they talked about his for the rest of the evening and a magnificent party was had and that was how it all began.

Six weeks later they were engaged.

Mrs. Stewart, who was a charming woman but not a good judge of character, was delighted; she had fallen for Jocelyn in a big way.

She said to her husband: "He's exactly the right man for Juliet. They have so many tastes in common; they both write, and they'll understand each other beautifully. That's always a perfect basis for marriage."

Ian Stewart wasn't so happy about it. He said: "I hope you're right, my dear, but Waring is a demanding type and Juliet—well, she has some of your virtues, perhaps without your common sense. She's too modest about her own abilities and she's too unselfish. She puts such a high value

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on that chap's work—rightly, I admit—that she may sacrifice her own for it.”

Mrs. Stewart, with an innate tendency to look on the bright side, disputed that.

“He's so much in love with her, I'm sure he'd never let her do that.

“We shall see,” he told her, doubtfully. “I hope you're right, but I wish I were surer that I'm wrong.”

He was far from wrong. Juliet was in love, in a perfectly normal, healthy way, but she also felt that she had a mission to cherish and encourage Jocelyn's work. She admired and revered it, partly because she believed that it was so superior to her own, and so far as she could compass it, he was to have everything in the world which would help him in it.

He had already embarked on a new book before their marriage, and it was obvious that, wherever they were to live after it, there must be a room set apart for his work, where he could be comfortable, undisturbed and mentally at ease. He was still going to keep rooms in his College, but, as he said: “I'm not marrying the most delightful woman in the world, to spend half my time away from her. I must at least be under the same roof.”

So they went flat-hunting and nothing pleased him. It appeared that his ideas—of everything—were on a large scale. Only in circumstances of urbanity, luxury and beauty could he work.

To Juliet, who had been accustomed to writing in her bed-

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room, this attitude was simply a proof of his superior sensitivity, so they changed the object of their search from flats to houses, and any which were available in the vicinity of Oxford, he considered suburban, and therefore, he said, stultifying to his brain.

Eventually, they found one which suited him in Woodstock, called, for some unknown reason, the Stone House. It was larger and more important than anything which Juliet had visualised, but there was no doubt about its being delightful.

Fortunately, by a real stroke of unexpected luck, Juliet could afford to buy it, for as Jocelyn said, he had no money on that scale. "A poor Don," he lamented, "can't expect to compete with a successful novelist—" and if there was a certain derogation in his voice, Juliet didn't notice it.

She had just sold the film rights of one of her books, and with the proceeds—they were quite modest compared with the fantastic figures one reads of—she bought the house and furnished it and they settled into it to live the kind of life which Jocelyn said he had always wanted.

It was a charming place, early eighteenth century, fronting on to the wide village street, with few but large and well proportioned rooms and a garden at the back adjoining the Park and grounds of Blenheim.

Jocelyn had an elegant study with a magnificent view, on the first floor, furnished as befitted its attractions and his exacting taste. Juliet worked in the dining room, which was small and faced the road. She had thought of having her desk in the drawing room, a really lovely room, which went from front to back of the house, with windows at both ends, but Jocelyn felt that would be a pity, and that the room

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should always be ready for visitors—he greatly enjoyed entertaining.

The house was expensive to run and the charming little dinner parties which Jocelyn liked to give at frequent intervals, with all the correct wines and the fruits of the earth out of their season, cost a lot of money.

Juliet found that she had to work hard to keep up with it all. Two books a year was the least that it could all be accomplished on, but Jocelyn was a delightful husband and great fun to be with, and she found that it was worth it.

Everything went well until his next book was published.

He had taken quite a time to write it and appeared to have worked hard, but it had a shocking press. "Slovenly and not entirely accurate," the critics complained, and "without the charm and unobtrusive erudition of his previous work."

Jocelyn went down into the depths of misery. He "railed on Lady Fortune in good terms" and cursed the critics for unfairness, partiality, lack of education, prejudice and jealousy.

His attitude made him very difficult to live with and he worked off his discomfort and disappointment on Juliet, behaving as though she were to blame. She got quite desperate about it, for his miseries actually upset her work and prevented her having a clear mind to give to it.

She was so worried about the state of things that she asked advice of Robin Ridgeway, who was Jocelyn's literary agent as well as hers. He was a friend as well and she valued his friendship considerably—he did more than merely value hers, though she had never realised it.

His home was in Oxford, but she went to see him in

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his London office, as she had business to do with him over a new contract.

"Robin," she asked, when that was finished, "I want your candid opinion about Jocelyn's new book. Is it as bad as the critics say?"

His pleasant, intelligent face was troubled.

"Honestly, I don't know, Juliet. I'm not an expert on his subject as you know, so I can't pronounce about the accuracy and so on. I do reckon to be a judge of writing to some extent, and I think they're right about its not being up to his earlier standard. Some of his arguments, too, don't seem to me to hold water. What do you think yourself?"

She hesitated. "Very much the same I think. He can't or won't see it himself, and he's bitter about the criticism he's had. He says he'll never write another book."

"That, of course, is exactly *not* the attitude to take up. He hasn't written nor been to see me since the book was published, and I don't know quite how he'd take advice from me, but you could pass this on, perhaps. I had a talk, the other day, with Osbert Hentshell—he's one of my clients too, you know. He's writing a book on exactly the same subject, and he's pretty fed up that Jocelyn got his out first. That's not the point though. The thing is that he is an authority on it. Lots of people—including himself, incidentally—think that he should have got the Fellowship Jocelyn did.

"Well, he says that, in this new book, Jocelyn has been guilty of the unforgivable—arguing on unproven premises and suppressing facts which would invalidate the points he wants to make. He's indignant about it—Hentshell, I mean

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—talks about a betrayal of scholarship, criminal carelessness and things of that kind! He's going to add a chapter to his new book pointing this out."

"Oh heavens, Robin!" Juliet was horrified. "Hentshell's terribly well thought of. I don't know him very well, but he's a bad man to have against you, I'm sure."

"That's true, especially when he feels so strongly about anything as he does about this."

"It'll do Jocelyn a lot of harm, won't it?"

"I'm afraid it will, and if, as you say, he says he isn't going to write another book, it will pretty well finish him."

"That's dreadful. What d'you think he ought to do, then?"

"Burst into print as quickly as possible, and either defend his book or acknowledge that he's made a mistake."

"I don't think he'd ever do that, Robin."

"Admit he's wrong? He'd find it difficult, I know, but he'd be well advised to do it, all the same. Hentshell's going to show him up if he can. He's thoroughly vindictive about it."

Juliet sighed. "Well, I'll do my best, but—Jocelyn's not an easy proposition where his work's concerned, especially. He just can't take criticism."

Ght did try to speak to Jocelyn on the subject, but he resented what she said, though she put it as gently and tactfully as she knew how.

"Do you think the last book is bad?" he demanded.

She hesitated. "Not as good as your earlier one, my dear, I'm afraid."

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"In what way?"

"Well, I can't criticize your subject matter; I don't know enough about it but I don't think the style is—"

He interrupted rudely. "Style! What do you know about that? I'm not writing detective stories, you know."

She turned away, deeply hurt, but that was only the beginning of what she had to put up with.

He grew moodier and quarrelsome and she never knew from day to day what to expect from him. They would spend delightful periods when he was his old gay charming self and then for perhaps a week after that he would never speak to her pleasantly.

He would have outbursts of entertaining, when the house must be full of people, and follow them by demands to be left alone and not made to speak to anyone.

He had some project of extra mural work on hand, though he didn't tell Juliet what it was, but absented himself for evenings on end, merely saying that he found it easier to work in his rooms in College than at home.

She was worried and bewildered by it all and didn't know what to do for the best. There were times when he made her feel that he hated her, when he jeered and sneered at her work, and yet was obviously jealous of the fact that it earned more than his.

She said to Robin Ridgeway one day: "Do you think I could write a straight novel?"

"I don't see why not," he told her. "Do you want to?"

"I'd like to try. Jocelyn despises my stuff. He might have more respect for me if I could do the other."

"Have a shot at it, then. I think you'd be good, only,

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as your agent, Juliet, I've got to warn you that you'd lose money over it, bar a miracle."

Her face fell. "Why?"

"Well, you see, you've built up your public over the years by writing detective stuff. If you try to give them something different, you'll lose a lot of them—they don't want anything different from you. If you write another kind of book under another name, you have to start again at the beginning and build up that name and make a new public for the new stuff. Bar, as I said, a miracle, by which I mean bringing off a big success the first time, you'd halve your income."

"Which I can't afford to do—so bang goes another pipe dream!" She sighed, deeply.

He, too, sighed, when she'd left him. He knew well enough why she couldn't afford to risk earning less than she was doing. "Damn Jocelyn Waring!" he said aloud.

The crisis came one cold day in the late winter. Spring should really have been on its way, but it was far behind and a powdering of snow lay on the ground and the sky was grey and heavy with more to come.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon and Jocelyn wasn't yet back from Oxford. Juliet having finished her tea, was sitting alone with a book by a huge fire in her delightful drawing room, when her maid appeared.

"There's a lady to see you, Madam—Miss Cecily Compton."

Juliet couldn't remember anyone of that name.

"What does she want, Alice? Did she say?"

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Alice shook her head. "She asked if you were alone, Madam. She's a nice looking young lady and seems a bit nervous."

"Oh! Well, I'd better see her, I expect. Will you show her in?"

In a second or so she rose to greet the "nice looking young lady", and found the description an under-statement. Cecily Compton was an extremely pretty girl of about twenty and very obviously scared, not just "a bit nervous".

Juliet stretched out a friendly hand, to put the girl at her ease, but it was ignored.

The girl said in a pretty voice, which matched her looks: "You *are* Mrs. Waring?"

"I am," Juliet confirmed, with an amused smile.

"I didn't think you'd be like this. You're warm and friendly and I hadn't imagined that. It somehow makes it more difficult—"

"What is it you want from me?" Juliet wanted to know. She imagined that the girl was probably going to ask her to speak at some Literary Society or other. She got a lot of such requests.

Cecily Compton flushed, hotly, and then, apparently making up her mind, blurted out starkly:

"I've come to ask you to divorce Jocelyn."

The smile on Juliet's lips faded and she grew very pale. After a second she said: "I don't think I can have heard properly."

"I asked you if you wouldn't change your mind about divorcing Jocelyn." She seemed to have gained courage and spoke more boldly.

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Juliet could not find words for a moment. Then she said, quickly, her voice shaking a little.

"Divorce Jocelyn? I? Divorce? I simply don't understand you, Miss Compton."

"He's asked you so many times," the girl said, pleadingly, "and you've kept on refusing. I thought, perhaps, if I came and saw you myself, I could make you see how much we love each other, and how cruel it is of you to keep him when he wants to be free."

Juliet caught her breath, sharply.

"Jocelyn, you say, has asked me so many times to divorce him? Miss Compton, I can assure you that he has never even mentioned it to me. What made you think he had?"

"He told me so."

"Jocelyn did?"

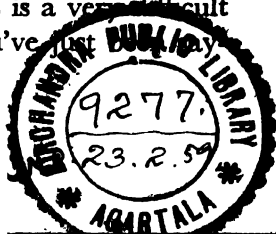
"Yes, over and over again."

"I'm deeply sorry for you then, but he was lying if that's so. I can assure you, categorically, that he has never asked me for a divorce and I have never refused it. I've never even—even thought of such a thing. Jocelyn and I are a perfectly contented couple—"

"That's what you think, perhaps," the girl broke in. "But Jocelyn's bitterly unhappy. You see—you mustn't mind my saying it—you don't understand him."

Juliet groaned inwardly: that old gambit. Could any girl nowadays be so unsophisticated as to fall for it? She was beginning to get her poise back and though deeply shaken, she could think more clearly.

She said, aloud: "Miss Compton, this is a very difficult situation for both of us. I find what you've just



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ing almost impossible to believe and yet I feel sure that you are speaking the truth as you see it."

"I am, indeed I am," the girl assured her, urgently.

"Then supposing you tell me your story from the beginning."

There was a moment of awkwardness and hesitation. Then words flowed.

"I went to some of Jocelyn's lectures and presently he spoke to me and we got to know each other better. He took me out a few times and then—then we found that we loved each other. He told me that we weren't doing anyone any harm, and that you didn't care for him any more. He said you were absorbed in your writing and were cold and uninterested in anything else. He said you'd be glad to give him a divorce because married life didn't appeal to you—so—so—well, we've been lovers for six months. I—I wouldn't have—have done what he asked if he hadn't been so lonely and he promised me that we should soon be married and then he asked you and you refused to divorce him—he said he'd go on asking you and you'd get used to the idea and give in.

"Then, last week, he told me that he'd asked you again and you'd refused, finally, and said you'd never agree. And then—" tears came into the girl's eyes and her voice shook—"he said he thought we ought to give up hope and never see each other again.

"I spent the week-end thinking and thinking and wondering if there were anything I could do. I was desperate—the thought of never seeing Jocelyn again, of giving up all we'd planned—I couldn't bear it. So I made up my mind to come and see you!"

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She broke off and burst into tears, crying : " What shall I do? Oh! What shall I do?"

Juliet was dreadfully troubled. She felt that she wanted to comfort this poor child, but what comfort was there to give her? They were two women who had trusted and been betrayed by the same man, but she was the older, the more experienced, the more sophisticated, and she ought to be able to find something to say. She tried.

" Cecily," she began, " this has all been a terrible shock to me and to you, too. I haven't had time to think about it yet, and I can't say what I shall feel when I've—accepted it. But—do you think that Jocelyn is worth your unhappiness? You can see that he never meant to marry you—I'm so very sorry for you, for your disillusionment—I'm horrified to think that I'm married to a man who could behave like this—but do you think that, if I did divorce him he'd marry you? Or that you'd ever trust him again, if he did? Wouldn't it be better to put him right out of your mind? To accept the fact that he's what I—what any decent person—would call a bad man, and feel that you've had a lucky escape?"

Cecily's sobs had ceased, and she was drying her eyes and listening, in an almost horror-struck way, to what Juliet was saying.

Suddenly, she cried : " Oh! How awful for you! I hadn't realised before that you must be feeling dreadful, too! I can't believe it, Mrs. Waring, that Jocelyn, *Jocelyn* could be so—so—"

" Worthless," Juliet put in, bitterly.

" I thought he was the most wonderful man I'd ever met—"

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The door suddenly opened and Jocelyn came in.

He stood completely still for a second, staring at Cecily, then he took a step towards her, his face hot with anger.

"Cecily!" he almost shouted. "What the devil are you doing here?"

Juliet said, very quietly and coldly: "She came to tell me that you had asked me, over and over again, to divorce you so that you could marry her, and that I had repeatedly refused."

"She's lying, Juliet," he cried, turning towards her. "I promise you she's lying."

"No," Juliet said, her voice icy. "You are lying, Jocelyn. I believe every word she has told me—as *she* believed *you*."

Without another word or a look, she turned her back on both of them and walked out of the room, quickly and firmly closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER TWO

ONCE outside the room, she found that she was shaking all over, her knees were trembling and she could hardly stand. She felt as though she were going to faint.

Blindly, she groped for the handle of a door, opened it and found herself, for a moment, hardly realising where she was, in the dining-room.

For a second the world seemed to be swinging round, but then it steadied itself and she moved slowly over to her desk and sank into her chair in front of it.

She laid her hands on the desk and let her head fall on them while she tried to think, but her mind was whirling, and coherent thought wouldn't come. All she was aware of was shock and blinding, conflicting emotions. She felt desperate, and lonely as she had never been in her life before.

Minutes passed — she had no idea how long — and then she heard the front door open, and close with a bang.

She looked up through the window, and there she saw Cecily Compton hurrying through the dusk of the wide street, her handkerchief held to her eyes.

For a second she thought of running after her, saying something to her and then, hastily, she changed her mind.

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There was nothing more to be said, and probably the poor girl, like herself, craved for solitude in this moment of disillusionment.

She got up from her chair and found that she was shivering with cold.

She heard Jocelyn's footsteps leaving the drawing-room and climbing the stairs, and realised, with thankfulness, that he'd probably gone to his study.

She waited until she heard the click of his door closing, and then hurried to the drawing-room, where she huddled down by the fire trying to get warm.

Presently, a little warmth began to creep into her, and she stopped shivering, though her heart was still beating faster than its normal.

"I need a drink to pull me together," she told herself and went to the cupboard which served as a bar and poured herself out a stiff whisky and soda, which she took over to the fireplace.

Standing there, she began to drink, then she lit a cigarette, and slowly she recovered from her shock and her mind began to work again.

She was alone for perhaps half an hour, her thoughts racing, her emotions deliberately kept in their place, before Jocelyn came to her.

She could see that he was unsure of himself—and of her.

He tried—and failed—to speak in an ordinary natural voice.

"You've got a drink? Good idea, I'll have one myself."

He filled a glass and came to the fireplace, too, standing, as she was.

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"Juliet," he began, urgently. "You don't really believe what that silly little bitch said, do you?"

"Every word," she told him quickly.

"Oh! But she exaggerated the whole thing. I admit to a little—let's call it flirtation. She's a pretty child and indulged in a bit of hero worship for me—"

Juliet cut him short.

"Jocelyn, you seduced that poor girl with promises of marriage which you never intended to keep. Then, you got tired of her. Good old-fashioned melodrama stuff. I'm not going to say anything about my own feelings at your unfaithfulness, but I can't be silent about my utter disgust and contempt at what you've done to her.

"I don't know how foolish she is—she may forgive you. I shan't. I never want to see you again. I'm ashamed of the love I've given you and I don't want to be reminded of it.

"You will please leave this house tonight and never come back again."

He was horrified and evidently surprised at her attitude and began to excuse himself, to minimise what he'd done, to plead for forgiveness.

She spoke as though she were completely self-contained—which was an effort, because she wasn't—and as coldly and decisively as she knew how.

"I don't want to hear any more. I've made up my mind and said my last word. Our marriage is over and I don't want you here any longer."

He lost his temper, then.

"You're being absurd! You can't turn me out of my own house like this, at a minute's notice."

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"It's not your own house," she reminded him, quietly. "It's mine. I bought it and paid for it for us to live in on our marriage. You've broken that—"

"Damn it, Juliet! One little lapse—"

"Jocelyn," she said, as calmly as she could, "if it were just that you'd been unfaithful to me, momentarily, on an impulse, I could forgive it. I would; but it's what you've done to that girl which is beyond forgiveness, which makes you a different person from what I believed you to be."

He tried, in all sorts of ways, to make her alter her mind, but found her adamant. She just refused to discuss the subject. She had said her last word on it. •

Eventually, and desperately unwillingly, he had to accept it, though not without telling her that it was only for the time being. Then, later on, he left the house, slamming the door behind him and she was alone.

She spent an almost sleepless night, more bitterly unhappy than she had ever been in her life before, but she greeted the morning convinced, in spite of all the arguments she had put to herself in the night, that the course she had decided on was the only possible one. °

Nevertheless, she didn't want to take any final step entirely on her own initiative; she wanted someone else to tell her that she was doing right.

In one way, her parents would have been the natural people to consult, but she shrank from confiding in them. The suggestion of a divorce would shock her mother terribly, and she would argue against it from instinct and

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not from reason, and that would only prolong the agony.

Her father would be unhappy for her unhappiness, and she knew well how he would worry and torment himself as to whether he was giving her the right advice.

No, she thought, better leave them out of it until it's irrevocable, until I've set divorce machinery to work.

But she still wanted reassurance, and she finally decided to put the case to the best friend she had, Robin Ridgeway.

She rang him up and found that he would be in Oxford that day and made an appointment with him.

They met for a drink at the Mitre, that world famous old Oxford pub, which "restorers" and "modernisers" have done their best to spoil with, fortunately, only partial success. Some atmosphere of the past still lingers about it, in spite of varnished oak.

They found a table away from the bar, where they could talk quietly and when Robin had got their drinks, she began her story.

"The damned swine!" he exclaimed, when she'd finished. "What are you going to do, Juliet?"

"Divorce him, I suppose. Do you think I'm right?"

"Right? I should think you are. Thank God, you've made up your mind to it at last. I've always wondered how you've stood it for so long."

"Stood what?" she asked in surprise.

"Jocelyn's philanderings, of course."

"Philanderings?"

He shrugged. "That's the kindest word to use."

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"Robin. What do you mean?"

He looked hard at her. "Is that news to you?" he asked, gently. "I mean, haven't you known about the way he's behaved?"

"I think you'd better explain, my dear. Are you suggesting that this isn't his first—lapse—I think they call it."

"My dear girl—" he began, and broke off helplessly.

"Go on," she urged. "Tell me."

"It's difficult. I thought you knew and had decided to be forgiving. That's what everyone thought. Jocelyn had always had a bad reputation with women, but when you were married, he was so evidently in love that it seemed as though he'd finished with his wild oats and was going to settle down at last. For two or three years he never looked at another woman, so far as anyone could see, and then—well, it all started again."

Juliet looked so stricken that he was worried about her. He hastily went to get her another drink. When he came back she was very white and lifted her glass with a hand that shook a little.

"Robin," she said, very earnestly. "Do you mean that Jocelyn has been unfaithful to me for all these years and I've never known,—never even suspected such a thing?"

"Unfaithful, Juliet? Who can say how far these affairs went? He has certainly chased after various women, made himself conspicuous with them, and some of them haven't the reputation of going in for platonic affairs."

"And I never knew! Why didn't somebody tell me? Why didn't you?"

"My dear, I think everyone believed that you were sufficiently fond of Jocelyn to put up with it. I'm sure

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everyone thought that you couldn't have helped knowing—I certainly did—and if you'd decided to overlook it, it would be an impertinence to speak to you about it. You've always kept yourself to yourself a bit, haven't you? I mean, everyone likes and admires you, but I don't think anyone feels they know you very well. You're reserved, aren't you?"

She thought that over. "In a way, I suppose I am. Yes, I suppose I can see how it happened—but you, Robin, I've never been reserved with you, have I?"

He tried to laugh. "I think I must have notice of that question."

She smiled, rather wanly. "All this has been a shock, Robin, and it's a horrid blow to my pride. Still it makes me all the more sure that divorce is the only answer. I've made a mess of this, so far, and the best thing is to face it and cut my losses. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, emphatically. And start afresh."

"As for that—" She sighed, deeply. "Let's get over this—horridness. I shall have to go to a lawyer, shan't I?"

"Yes."

"Then, to whom? The only one I know is old Murdoch, whom father goes to. He looked after the buying of the Stone House for me."

Robin shook his head. "He's not the right kind of man for this. He's an utterly reliable old stick in the mud who'd try to persuade you to leave things as they are, or, at the worst, have a judicial separation. You mustn't do that, Juliet. You must make a complete break."

"I agree. Who's it to be, then?"

"I'll find out for you and let you know. You want the

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best man there is, who'll do it all with the least trouble and worry for you and keep it all as quiet as possible. Jocelyn won't defend, will he?"

"How can he? Both he and the girl have admitted their—their liaison. Oh Robin! I do feel so dreadfully sorry for her. She was so sincere, so deadly in earnest. She believes that Jocelyn is the love of her life and all that kind of thing, and she's so young that she can't believe these things don't last."

He was very serious. "Do you believe that, Juliet?"

"What else can I do?" she asked, pitifully. "I thought that marriage was for ever and ever 'forsaking all others, cleaving only unto him'—all that. I never imagined that you could fall out of love as deeply as you fell in."

"Is that what you've done?"

"I'm afraid so—only not so quickly. It's been a gradual process of disillusionment, with a big bump at the end."

"Would it help to tell me about it?"

"It might—briefly. I suppose it's been very simple, really, only I never thought it could happen to me. I was really rather sickened at the way Jocelyn took the bad reception of his last book. It was childish and rather stupid. I tried not to see it; to make excuses for him, but it did something to me. He wasn't the person I thought he was. Then I began to wonder if he ever had been. He seemed to blame everyone else for his failure, never himself. You might almost have thought it was *my* fault. He seemed to stop even liking me and it dried me all up inside."

"I'm not an introspective woman, Robin, but I've been alone a lot, lately, and I haven't been able to help thinking about things and asking myself questions—that was

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the gradual process, and then this thing, yesterday—and I just didn't love him any more. Treating that child, like that and then trying to deny it—well, he just wasn't a person I *could* love. There can't be any excuse for behaving like that, can there? And that's all."

He laid his hand over hers. "Poor Juliet."

"Thank you, Robin. But you mustn't be too sorry for me. It's all my own fault, in the long run. Like Titania, 'Methought I was enamoured of an Ass'. I'll get over it—in time. But I'm feeling pretty humiliated, all the way round, and I've got to learn to live with myself again, on friendly terms. At the moment, I can't,—but I daresay it will come."

"It will, my dear, it certainly will, and if I can help, let me know."

She drove back to Woodstock in mid-afternoon, feeling a little comforted in mind, but utterly exhausted. She thought: I'll go home and go to bed and Alice will look after me.

There was no doubt that Alice would enjoy doing so, for she was devoted to Juliet, and was, into the bargain, what used to be called a treasure.

She had been in "good service" before the war, and then married. Presently her husband died, leaving her with a little boy, whom she was determined to keep with her. She had rather a tough time, and when, on her marriage, Juliet advertised for a maid, Alice Williams answered, and accepted the job gladly.

There was a flat over the garage—which had once been

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stable and coach house, and Alice lived there happily with her small son, and felt a debt of gratitude for being allowed to earn her living and have a home for her child at the same time.

However, when Juliet got home, she found a blazing log fire in the drawing room and a tea table prepared in front of it, she changed her mind about going to bed, and settled herself down with a book to try to keep herself from thinking.

The warmth of the fire, and the peace and beauty of the room gradually soothed her; her mind began to drift more easily away from her miseries and she began to try to plan a future in which Jocelyn would have no part.

There must be no regrets, she decided, no looking back. She must make a new life for herself, with new preoccupations, new interests. She would finish the book she was now writing and start a new one on totally different lines.

She was thinking that over, when the door opened and Jocelyn came in.

She was so deep in her thoughts that he startled her, and, for a second, she looked at him as though he were a stranger. He stood gazing at her, handsome, debonair, self-assured, and she was surprised to realize that his presence, for the first time since she had known him, was no longer a delight.

He came swiftly across the room towards her and began at once a plea for forgiveness, begging her to relent, saying that he couldn't live without her.

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She said, as quietly as she could: "It's no use, Jocelyn. Our life together is over."

"Oh Juliet!" he cried. "How can you be so cold and dispassionate, so unlike yourself? Can't you make allowances and forgive and forget?"

She answered him slowly, choosing her words.

"For myself, I've forgiven and I expect I'll forget, in time, but I can't either or ever forgive or forget what you've done to that poor child. That is absolutely final and you must accept it. I shall divorce you as soon as I can and then you can marry her as you promised her—if she'll have you."

That startled him. "What d'you mean?"

"She may think, now, that marrying you isn't what she thought it would be. She's very much disillusioned about you, Jocelyn."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, in an ugly voice: "Don't be too sure about divorcing me. I shall fight it, you know."

"You can't. You've admitted you've been unfaithful to me."

"Not before witnesses."

"Cecily."

He laughed, sardonically. "You don't think she'll give evidence against me, do you? She's not going to run into the divorce court and admit publicly that she's been my mistress. And you won't get any other evidence, I can assure you. I've been much too careful."

* * * * *

At that moment, Juliet almost hated him. His voice, his

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manner, what he said and the vindictive way in which he said it, shocked her beyond belief. This man was a stranger and a stranger she never wanted to see again and she told him so.

At last he went, after making a scene of anger, recrimination and abuse, which made her feel unclean. Never in her life had anyone spoken to her like that before—and this was her husband!

When he had gone she found herself shaken and mentally bruised. Perhaps it was a good thing, she decided, eventually, that he had shown himself to her like that. She would feel the less sorrow over the breaking of her marriage.

Before she slept, she wrote a letter to him.

"Jocelyn, our marriage is now at an end and I no longer consider myself as your wife.

"I should like you to take away all your belongings from the house, as soon as possible, but I don't want to see you again.

"I will arrange to be away on Saturday, from eleven in the morning until eight at night. That should give you plenty of time to get everything packed up and removed."

* * * * *

The last post had gone, of course, but she put on her coat, nevertheless, and took her letter to the nearest pillar box.

She had a feeling of absolute finality when that was done, and on Saturday she would take the first steps towards making her decision irrevocable.

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When, at last, she went to bed, she slept dreamlessly, from sheer emotional exhaustion, and woke, in the morning to a sense of relief that she no longer queried the rightness of her judgment.

On Friday a postcard arrived from Jocelyn, "Very well, I will take my stuff away on Saturday, but don't think that I'm going to acquiesce in your other ideas."

On Saturday morning, having made a series of appointments there, she drove to Oxford.

She went first to see Oldworthy, the lawyer whom Robin Ridgeway had recommended and gave him her instructions for a divorce; she went to have a fitting of a new tweed suit her tailor was making for her and then she met Robin Ridgeway, once again at the Mitre.

"Well, what luck?" he asked her at once. "Everything settled with Oldworthy?"

She looked a little rueful.

"I'm afraid that's not going to be quite so simple as I'd hoped, Robin. Jocelyn says he'll fight a divorce and Mr. Oldworthy says that if he does, things may be difficult. He'll have to get detectives to try to find evidence against Jocelyn, and all sorts of horridness like that."

"Oh my dear! How very bad! I'd never imagined Jocelyn's fighting. That's an appalling thought."

"It is. Well—" she shrugged her shoulders—"apparently there's nothing I can do about it except make a list of dates when Jocelyn was away from home. Let's forget that, shall we? I hate the whole thing so much that I don't want to think of it more than I can help."

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"I don't blame you. Juliet have you tried to make any plans, yet—about what you're going to do, I mean? You won't stay on at the House will you?"

"Of course I shall. It's my home and I love it."

"But—alone?"

"That doesn't frighten me. I've got Alice."

"That's one comfort, but won't you be terribly lonely?"

"Not if I work as hard as I intend to—I shall try to change the rooms around a bit, so as not to have too many—reminders—"

"You mean Jocelyn's things?"

She smiled rather ruefully. "They should be gone by the time I get back there tonight. I've told him to take them all away, today, while I'm out."

"You mean he's doing it now?"

"I hope so. I don't want to see them—or him—ever again. Robin, I don't want to be self-pitying or injured or any of those tiresome things, but the fact remains that my life has been broken up. What's more, I've been living in a fool's paradise. I loved what I thought was Jocelyn and he's turned out to be someone quite different. I thought I was—right—for him, that I was the woman he wanted, who satisfied all his needs. I was wrong again, about that. I've got to face it and it hurts. I feel humiliated and, in a way, ashamed of myself. I set myself a job to do—to give Jocelyn what he wanted from life and I've failed. That being so, I've got to start all over again in a new way and I don't want to be reminded of my failures. I don't want to see him, or his books, or his personal belongings ever again—I can't explain properly, but I think you can understand."

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"I think I can, my dear!"

"Thank you, Robin. You're a very good friend."

She got up and collected her bag and gloves. "I must go now. I've got an appointment with the hairdresser."

"But your lunch?"

"I shall skip that."

"What are you doing for the rest of the day?" he asked her.

"When I've had my hair done I've some shopping to do and after that I'm going to see the parents and I shall stay there until it's time to go home."

"Time?" he queried.

She nodded. "I've told Jocelyn to be out of the house by eight, I don't want to be home before that. Why this questionnaire, Robin?"

He smiled. "I was hoping we might be able to meet again. Can I come over and see you tomorrow?"

"I should like that."

"Will you give me lunch?"

"Of course—oh, no! I forgot. Alice will be out all day—I've given her the weekend off. She hardly ever gets a Sunday."

"Then I'll take you out. We'll lunch at the Bear."

"That will be lovely, Robin. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

She was on her way out of the bar when she suddenly found herself face to face with Osbert Hentshell, Jocelyn's bitter critic and rival, with whom she, herself, was always on perfectly amiable terms.

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He was rather a touchy person, ultra sensitive, and apt to take offence if he thought he was being overlooked or slighted, so she made a point of stopping to speak to him.

"How pleasant to run into you, Dr. Hentshell," she began. "How are you? It's ages since we met, isn't it?"

His scholarly face lit up as he heard her voice.

"Mrs. Waring, how delightful! Where are you off to? Seeing we've met, so fortunately, I insist on your having a drink with me. No! I can take no denial."

She wanted to say no, but daren't, in case he took umbrage. She knew him to be an embittered man, with a strong inferiority complex, heaven alone knew why, for, in his own line of country, he was recognized as a most distinguished scholar, and greatly respected. He had, however, no personal charm, and people in general found him difficult to get on with. Juliet wasn't one of those, and it was evident that, in his rather crabbed way, he liked and admired her.

"I'm afraid I can't stay long," she excused herself as she let him lead her to a table. "I've got an appointment with the hairdresser and that's a thing no woman dare be late for."

They exchanged small talk for ten minutes or so and then she declared that she really must go.

"And how is Waring?" he asked her, as they shook hands. "Is he in Oxford with you today?"

"No, he's at home," she told him, quickly inventing an excuse. "I'm going to have tea with my parents and he loathes tea parties. Most men do, don't they?"

* * * * *

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When she had said goodbye to Hentshell, she rushed off to keep her appointment, and when she had had her hair washed and set, she spent the rest of the afternoon doing some desultory shopping and not taking very much interest in it. However, it served to keep her mind off her problems until about five o'clock when she arrived at her parents' house.

There, a disappointment awaited her, for she had counted on staying with them for most of the evening, but she found that they were going out to dine with friends some distance away, and would have to leave at about six.

There was no reason, of course, why she shouldn't remain in the house after they went, but she didn't like the idea. What she wanted was company, not solitude.

The time had come now, she felt, to break the news of her impending divorce. Now that her mind was made up and the first steps towards it taken, there was no reason, she felt, for not telling them.

Her mother reacted more or less as she had expected. She was shocked and conventionally resistant to the idea. Divorce was "not done", so to speak, and if you made a mistaken marriage, you had to put up with it. Also, she was more than reluctant to believe that Jocelyn, who was a great favourite of hers, could possibly have been unfaithful to Juliet.

Ian Stewart was shocked, but in a different way—he was up in arms on his daughter's behalf, and when he heard that Jocelyn proposed to fight, he was indignant.

"It's preposterous that he's not enough of a gentleman to make things as easy as possible for you," he protested.

Altogether, between the two of them, Juliet found that

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she wasn't too sorry not to be spending the evening with them and she hastily cast around in her mind for other plans.

She rang up her friend, Linda Burnett. They had been intimate for years and was Juliet's only real woman friend. Since her marriage, she had seen less of Linda than she would have liked, but Jocelyn didn't care much either for her or her husband and the result was inevitable. He would neither go to their house nor have them asked to his more than was absolutely necessary for politeness.

Linda was delighted when Juliet asked if she could come and spend an hour or so with her.

"That will be lovely," she said enthusiastically. "Dick's out this evening, so we can have a real good talk. We haven't been alone together, you and I, for such ages."

It was shortly after six when Juliet reached the Burnetts' house at Begbroke, and Linda ran to open the door as soon as she heard the car drive up.

"Darling!" she cried. "What heaven to see you. But what are you doing here? Jocelyn has just rung me up to ask me to a party!"

CHAPTER THREE

JULIET put her hat and coat down in the hall and followed Linda Burnett into her cosy sitting-room. Cosy was the exact word for it and for Linda herself. She was the complete antithesis of Juliet, plump and blonde and exuberant, without inhibitions and with an equable temperament.

She was not however, in any way a silly or trivial young woman. She had plenty of sound common sense and a mind that was both shrewd and acute in her dealings with other people.

Juliet let herself sink into the deep comfort of a sofa by the fire.

"What's all this?" she demanded. "Jocelyn asked you to a party?"

"Yes, my dear, and not much more than a quarter of an hour ago." She busied herself with bottles and glasses, talking at the same time.

"Gin and French?" she enquired. "As a matter of fact that's all there is, except beer. Yes, it seemed very odd, with you actually on your way here. He said: 'Will you and Dick come to a party, now. It's the last one I shall be giving in this house'. I said no, I couldn't, and was just going to tell him that I was expecting you, when he rang off. I thought he sounded a trifle tightish. Juliet, what did he

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mean? You're not leaving the Stone House, are you? What on earth did he mean?"

"He's leaving," said Juliet, after a moment's pause. "For good. I'm going to divorce him—if I can."

Linda's breath was taken away for a second. "Good Lord!" she exclaimed. "Which of them is going to be the co-respondent?"

"Which of them?" Juliet echoed.

"Which of his ladies?"

There was a dead silence for a second, then Juliet said, slowly: "So you knew, too?"

"Knew what?"

"That he was being unfaithful to me. Why didn't you, tell me?"

"My dear girl, I thought you knew. Besides, I value your friendship far too much to rush in where angels fear. My feeling was that if you'd wanted to talk to me about it, you would have done, and if you didn't, it wouldn't be a good thing to start the subject. You're rather a reticent person, you know, Juliet."

"Perhaps I am. Anyway, Linda, I never for one moment imagined that Jocelyn wasn't faithful to me until the other day. Everyone else seems to have known though."

"It's been notorious," Linda told her. "Everyone talked about it and everyone thought you knew and were being forgiving about it. What opened your eyes at last?"

Juliet told her about Cecily Compton, though she didn't mention her by name.

"How hateful for you. Poor child, I feel sorry for her, too."

"So do I," Juliet agreed. "I think it's the most horrible

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thing for Jocelyn to have done. I couldn't ever live with him again after that."

"So you really are going to divorce him?"

"Unless he succeeds in stopping me, as he says he's going to. In any case, I've finished with him. I've told him to take all his things away from the house—that's why he's there today. I wonder what he meant by 'a party'?"

"And asking us, too, because I've always known that he disliked Dick and me."

"That was jealousy, I think. He knew how fond I am of you and he didn't like it. I'm not to care about anyone but him. Well, it's all over now, anyway."

"I'm thankful, Juliet," Linda told her. "No one ever thought he was good enough for you."

"What I can't understand, in the circumstances, is why he's going to try to block the divorce."

Linda laughed. "My dear girl, be your age! All these years you've been providing him with a nice, comfortable living, a lovely house, a perfect hostess and a blind, adoring wife. He's had his cake and eaten it. Why *should* he want to have it all taken away from him?"

Juliet shivered, involuntarily. "Oh Linda! I can't believe that of him. Don't let's talk about it any more; it's all so horrible and sordid and it makes me feel—grubby!"

They spent the rest of their time together gossiping, as women do, about a dozen things—their gardens, new spring clothes, the price of vegetables, the ever rising cost of living—and Jocelyn was forgotten, or, at any rate, driven to the back of Juliet's mind.

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They had some dinner together, and then, soon after, Juliet started off back to her own house.

When she arrived there, a sudden fear assailed her that Jocelyn might not yet have gone, and she was so unwilling to take the chance of encountering him, that she drove around the village for another quarter of an hour or more, and it was well after nine when she finally garaged the car and let herself into the house.

Complete silence greeted and reassured her. The house felt cold and empty and still.

She went into the drawing room and took a quick breath of disgust. Jocelyn had indeed had a party!

The heavy lined damask curtains were drawn across the windows, the lights all on and the room was full of the smell of stale smoke.

The fire was practically out, and in spite of its stuffiness, the room was cold. Unemptied ash trays added to the general untidiness, as did cigarette ash on the carpet, and dirty glasses on almost every piece of furniture.

Juliet had dreaded the emotion of coming home to a house which had held Jocelyn and her married life, and now no longer did so, but this situation emptied her mind of everything but the need for getting things clean again.

She flung back the curtains and opened windows, and then resuscitated the fire and emptied the ashtrays into it. She fetched a tray from the pantry and piled the dirty glasses and empty bottles on to it and took them to the kitchen, where more disorder assailed her.

There were dirty plates and glasses in the sink, crumbs on the floor and table, and the door of the fridge stood wide open.

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She got the electric cleaner and cleaned the drawing-room carpet and then, going back to the kitchen, washed all the dirty glasses, dried them and put them away. Presently she had the place in order again, and then realised that she was tired, so tired that she knew she couldn't tackle another job that night.

She found half a bottle of whisky among the leavings and put that on a tray with a syphon, and a glass, filled a hot water bottle and carried them all to her bedroom, feeling that warmth and a stiff drink should enable her to sleep. Her body was tired enough, for it was nearly midnight, now, but she didn't trust her mind to relax and rest.

When she opened her bedroom door and switched on the light, she got yet another shock. Someone had been using her dressing table! An alien lipstick had rolled across the glass top, leaving a streak of crimson; face powder bespattered the mirror, where a puff had been shaken, and a trail of it lay across the pale plum coloured carpet.

She was too utterly weary to embark on extensive cleaning, and contented herself with removing the strange woman's traces with a face tissue, promising herself to do it properly in the morning.

When she had undressed, she flung back the curtains and opened her windows and then at last, she could fall into bed, and, almost instantaneously, into sleep.

She opened her eyes on Sunday morning to the first day of Spring; the world had changed overnight, and she wondered if it were a good omen for her beginning a new life.

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Yesterday had been grey and chilling, with the threat of rain. This morning, the sun was shining from a sky of palest blue and the air was full of the scent of the earth awakening and the song of jubilant birds.

She lay quietly, for ten minutes or so, appreciating the beauty of the new day and then, remembering what lay before her, got quickly up and, wrapping herself in a warm, quilted dressing-gown, ran downstairs to light the drawing room fire. Then, in the kitchen she made herself coffee and toast and sat there in the sunshine to eat her breakfast.

She was determined not to let anything depress her on this wonderful morning and kept her mind busy with the more cheerful of her future plans. She would turn Jocelyn's dressing room and study into a spare bedroom and a study for herself. It would be splendid at last to have a place to herself where she could leave her working books and papers spread about when she wanted. She would change the furniture round and have a new colour scheme and then nothing would be left to remind her.

She finished her breakfast, washed up the china and then went upstairs to have her bath and dress.

With pleasure she remembered that Robin was coming to take her out to lunch, and dressed for the occasion in a fine wool frock of almond green and added pale jade earrings and clip. The green against the chestnut of her hair was a pleasant sight, and, looking in the glass, she congratulated herself.

Then she thought that she would go and look at the two rooms she proposed to redecorate and see what ideas they would suggest to her.

She opened the door of Jocelyn's dressing room first,

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and the sun streamed in at her through windows whose curtains were unclosed.

But the bedside light was burning!

She took a step towards it to switch it off and saw that Jocelyn was lying on the bed dressed, apparently, with the eiderdown half pulled over him.

Her heart sank in dismay. That meant that he had drunk too much the day before and had thrown himself down to sleep it off. He would be in a dreadful state of hangover when he woke and impossible to cope with. She had encountered that before, though not often.

She stood irresolute for a second, wondering what her best move would be. Should she leave him until he woke and be out of the house when he did so, or—

Something about his attitude caught her attention and she went closer to the bed and looked at him closely.

His face was absolutely livid and his eyes were open and staring.

She touched him lightly to find that he was icy cold and his hands rigid.

It came to her then that he was dead.

When she had convinced herself of that, a shock of horror overcame her for a second, before hope sprang up that she might be wrong, and that something might yet be done for him.

She raced downstairs to the telephone and rang up the doctor.

He said that he would come at once and that, in the meantime she was to do nothing.

"You've had a shock," he added. "Keep yourself warm and wait for me."

The advice was hard to follow, yet she didn't know what else she could do. She went to crouch over the drawing room fire and found that she was shivering. Horror overwhelmed her as she sat there waiting, until, mercifully, Dr. Ferris arrived.

She didn't know him well, for she had had very little need for him as a doctor, but she liked what she had seen of him. He was pleasant and competent and though he wasn't so very much older than she was, he had a reassuring authoritative manner.

He asked to be left alone in Jocelyn's room and, on his orders, she went back to the fire and gave herself a stiff drink.

It was some time before he joined her and then he spoke quietly and at once.

"I'm afraid you were right, Mrs. Waring."

"He's dead?"

He nodded. "Yes, I don't think I need to tell you to be brave; you will be."

"But what?—how?—" she began.

He understood what she wanted to know.

"An overdose of some narcotic poison," he told her. "He has been dead for very many hours. You can comfort yourself that he died in his sleep and knew nothing about it. He didn't suffer at all."

"Thank God for that! But *how* could it have happened?"

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"I'd like you to help me to find that out. What time did he go to his room last night?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I was out all yesterday, until the late evening. I didn't even know that he was in the house when I came in. I was—" she half hesitated "—expecting him to spend the night in Oxford."

"I see." He paused, thoughtfully. "Now, Mrs. Waring. I know you write detective stories, so I think you know what we're up against. I can't sign a certificate and I shall have to notify the Coroner of your husband's death."

She bowed her head. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Naturally."

"But, of course, as you say, I know what the procedure is. It can't be helped."

"Now, I don't want to distress you more than I can help, but can you give me any suggestion as to where your husband could have got hold of the stuff that killed him—a narcotic poison, apparently? Was he in the habit of taking sleeping pills, for instance?"

She shook her head. "Definitely not."

"That makes it more difficult, doesn't it?"

She was very thoughtful.

"Yes—you mean—suicide?"

"Do you think that's likely?"

"So unlikely as to be almost impossible."

"Then, I'm afraid, it will have to be up to the police to find out."

He got up to go and just then the door bell rang. Juliet excused herself and went downstairs to answer it.

Robin Ridgeway was on the threshold. "I came a bit early—" he began and then broke off. "Juliet! What on

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earth's wrong?" he exclaimed, as he looked at her. "My dear, are you ill?"

She grasped the hand he held out to her. "Robin! Jocelyn's dead!"

"Good God! When? How? You don't really—" He was so startled that he couldn't find words.

"I don't know. I found him—oh! about an hour ago. The doctor's here now. He—he was poisoned—an overdose. Robin, I don't know what to think, or where I am. It's—it's incomprehensible! I'm so bewildered I can't think."

"My poor darling, don't upset yourself any more. I'll go and talk to the doctor, shall I? You go and lie down and I'll take charge of everything."

She gave a rueful half smile. "The police will do that, I'm afraid."

He hadn't time to ask her what she meant before they saw Dr. Ferris half way down the stairs.

"Oh! You have a friend here," he said. "I'm glad. Mrs. Waring, I'd like to use your telephone, please."

She told him where it was and then she and Robin went into the drawing room and she sat down by the fire and began shivering again.

"You ought to be in bed, Juliet," he told her, anxiously.

"That's no use, Robin. I couldn't stay there. I'll be all right as soon as I get warm."

He wasn't a stranger to the house and had some idea where things were kept. He made her lie down on a sofa which he pulled up to the fire and found a rug to wrap round her and poured her out a very stiff drink.

By that time, Dr. Ferris was back in the room and nodded approvingly at what Robin had done.

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"She needs someone to look after her," he said. "Mrs. Waring, the police will be here almost immediately, and you'll have to see them, I'm afraid, but after that, you should go to bed. I'll give you a sedative to take. You should have some woman with you—"

He talked soothingly and she let him, without listening properly, but Robin answered for her and presently the two men went over to the far side of the room, and she heard their quiet voices as they talked.

Before long there was the sound of the police car, drawing up outside the house, and the doctor left the room.

Robin came and sat down beside her. "You've not to let yourself get worked up, Juliet. You're being terribly brave. Keep it up until we're alone again, and then you can let yourself go."

"It's not bravery," she protested. "I'm dazed. My brain isn't functioning properly. I've heard people saying that 'this can't be true. It isn't happening to me' and I've thought 'how silly!' But that's just how I'm feeling."

"I'm not surprised. Juliet, do you want to talk about it?"

"Robin, I don't know what I want or what I don't want—only to wake up and find I've been dreaming it all. It seems so *impossible*. You see, there are such hideous implications—I've read and written too many detective stories not to know what all this means and leads up to. The police will say 'Murder, Suicide or Accident?' Murder it can't be; accident seems to me so unlikely that it's not worth considering—"

He interrupted her: "Why not?"

"Well, think of it. He died of an overdose of a narcotic. There's no earthly reason why he should ever take such a

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thing. He didn't. He had an enviable capacity for sleep, nothing ever kept him awake. There isn't a sleep-inducing thing in the house—never has been. He couldn't get hold of anything like that by mistake, so how could he have taken it accidentally? I wish that I could think that was the answer. It would make everything easier—comparatively. You see, suicide is the only thing left. He deliberately got hold of something to kill himself with—and that's my fault—the divorce."

"Stop that," Robin said quickly. "That's sheer rubbish, Juliet, and self-torture into the bargain. I've known Jocelyn for a good many years, and I'm prepared to swear that there was never anyone less likely to kill himself—and you know it, too."

She said, slowly: "Yes, I would have said so, but—what else can it be?"

"Accident, of course; something we haven't thought of. Someone offered him some aspirins and gave him sleeping pills by mistake. Something quite simple like that. You say he had a party here last night—that doesn't sound like an intending suicide, does it? He probably drank too much and had a headache and wanted something to cure it. Besides, Juliet, my dear, I don't want to hurt you, but do you think that in any case, the thought of your divorcing him would drive him to kill himself? He was intending to contest the divorce, which means that he had every hope of defeating you. Besides, if he didn't love you enough to be faithful to you, he wasn't going to be suicidal at the possibility of losing you, was he?"

"Put like that, it doesn't sound likely."

"And it isn't. It's out of the question, so stop tormenting

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yourself. It's a dreadful business, but, except for its effect on you, it's out of your hands. It's the police's pigeon. Leave it to them."

He had hardly said the words before the police, in the shape of Inspector Harris of the local County Constabulary, came into the room.

He was a friendly, pleasant man, who had often "passed the time of day", as he would have said himself, with Juliet, and admired her very much. He was proud of her, too, as the Local Author. She did the place credit.

He walked quietly to her side. "A sad business this, about the Professor, Mam," he said, at once. "I'd like to offer you my deep sympathy."

"Thank you, Inspector," Juliet said, with a faint smile. "That's good of you."

"Now," he drew up a chair beside her. "Dr. Ferris says you've had a bad shock, and no wonder, and you're naturally very upset and I'm not to tire you, which I shouldn't in any case, but I'm afraid I've got to ask you a few questions, though I'll make it as short as possible."

"Thank you," Juliet said again. "Ask me whatever you want."

"Perhaps you'd rather be alone, Mam?" he suggested with a glance at Robin.

"No, I don't think so. This is Mr. Ridgeway, an old friend, Inspector. I think I'd like him to stay."

"As you like," he agreed cordially. "This is the sort of time one wants friends, as you might say. Now, about the

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Professor. What time did you last see him yesterday?"

Juliet caught her breath. "I didn't see him at all, Inspector."

There was an awkward pause, and then, seeing how queer a statement that would appear to him, she quickly explained.

"You see, he had a special lot of work to do, so he has been living in College lately, in his rooms at Leycester. He came over to Woodstock yesterday to fetch some books and things that he needed, but I had to go to Oxford. I had a lot of appointments and I had to go and see my parents and I didn't get back until late."

"When did you last see him, then, if I may ask?"

"One day last week. He came over to see me."

"What sort of spirits was he in?"

"Oh! As usual, Inspector."

"Did you expect to see him when you got back last night?"

"Oh no! I knew he'd probably have to be in Oxford fairly early."

Queer sort of set-up, Inspector Harris reflected. Not what I'd call married life. But a writer and a Professor—well, I suppose they're always a bit odd, that kind.

Aloud he said: "Would you mind telling me just what you did do when you got back last night? I mean, was it you didn't know the Professor hadn't gone back to Oxford after all?"

Juliet took a deep breath. "I got back after nine and the house felt empty, if you know what I mean. I came up here to this room, and the fire was nearly out and there were lots of dirty glasses around. I assumed that my husband had

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been having people in to drink; and then gone off without bothering to clear up."

"Would that have been usual?"

"Entirely. He wasn't a—domesticated man."

"Some aren't," the Inspector agreed, grimly, thinking of what was expected from him, at home. "So, what did you do, next?"

She smiled, rather wanly. "Well, I *am* domesticated, you see, and I hated the thought of leaving this room in that state until the morning. So I cleared it up and I washed the glasses and cleaned the carpet and, by the time I'd finished, I was so tired that I went straight to bed."

"And you never looked in the—the room where your husband was?"

"I never even thought of it."

The Inspector moved a little uneasily in his chair.

"The Professor hasn't been—worried—in any way, lately, Mam? About his work, I mean, or money, or his health?"

She shook her head.

"And he'd no—domestic troubles?"

"No," she lied flatly. "Inspector, if you're trying to find out if my husband would be likely to commit suicide, the answer is no. That was the last thing—"

"Dr. Ferris tells me that, in his opinion, an accident was unlikely, and there isn't a sign of any narcotic poison in the house, because I've looked. Mrs. Waring, had your husband any enemies?"

Juliet almost laughed. "That sounds so melodramatic, Inspector. But no—"

Robin put in: "Professor Waring, Inspector, was mostly

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a popular man. He wasn't always easy to get on with—but no worse than most of us. The idea of his rousing actual personal enmity is absurd."

"Have you known him long, Sir?" the Inspector asked.

"For a number of years. Actually, I'm his literary agent, as I am Mrs. Waring's."

"Literary agent, Sir? What does that mean, exactly?"

"That I negotiate the sales of their books—that kind of thing."

"I see. So, from your knowledge of him, you wouldn't say he had any enemies?"

"I certainly would not."

The Inspector sighed. "Well, it's all very difficult, I must say."

He turned to Juliet.

"About last night, Mam. You say you found a lot of dirty glasses when you came in?"

"Yes."

"And you washed them up?"

"Yes"

"Why did you do that?"

"Natural tidiness, Inspector, as I told you."

"Would you say there had been a lot of people here?"

"About a dozen, perhaps."

"You don't know who they were?"

"I haven't an idea. I know that a friend of mine was asked, but she couldn't come."

"Did you have any idea beforehand that the Professor was giving a party?"

"None at all."

"Were you surprised?"

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"A little. I'd thought that my husband would just have collected what he wanted and gone back to Oxford, but he was an impulsive man. It would have been quite in character for him to decide, on the spur of the moment, that he wanted to give a party."

The Inspector got up slowly.

"Mam," he appealed to her, "you can't tell me anything that would help me?"

Robin said, quickly: "I think Mrs. Waring has told you all she knows, but it seems to me that a man who's contemplating suicide doesn't throw a party beforehand."

"It doesn't *sound* likely," Inspector Harris admitted. "But suicides are queer. They don't behave like ordinary people."

Then he paused and breathed rather heavily and looked with compassion at Juliet.

"I expect you've had enough of me, Mam. I'll be going, but you do as the doctor said and get to bed. I can see you're all in."

When he'd gone, Robin said to Juliet: "He's right, you know. You've behaved beautifully, but you are all in, and you must have some food before you go to bed."

"I ~~couldn't~~ eat, my dear."

"You must try. Will there be anything in the fridge?"

"Some soup perhaps."

"The very thing."

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When she had eaten a little, she admitted that she didn't feel up to very much, and agreed to go to her room and lie down. Then Dr. Ferris arrived and insisted on her getting right into bed and taking a sedative and she was, by now, too utterly exhausted to do anything but acquiesce.

The doctor said to Robin: "She's emotionally played out and she's putting an extra strain on herself by trying to behave normally and not give way. She oughtn't to get up again today and she ought to have some woman here to look after her. Can you arrange something?"

"I expect so," Robin told him, and after a few more instructions, Ferris went.

Juliet didn't sleep. Creeping quietly upstairs to listen, Robin could hear her moving about restlessly, and, at the end of a couple of hours, he knocked at her door and she told him to come in.

He found her sitting in her dressing-gown by the electric fire, with half a dozen books scattered on the floor around her.

She looked up at him with deeply shadowed eyes.

"It's no use, Robin. I can't even lie still, let alone sleep. I've been trying to read, but I can't find a book that holds my attention."

"Do you want to talk?"

"I don't know—but I don't want to think. I've been going over and over it all—and it's *hopeless*. Robin, Jocelyn didn't commit suicide, I'm sure. They've locked up his room but I've been in his study and all his things have gone from there—all his books and one of the bookcases and a

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little table he was particularly fond of and his pictures and his desk. He must have arranged with someone to take them away, and he wouldn't have done that if he didn't intend to use them, would he?"

"No, of course not. Doesn't that comfort you?"

"Yes, in a way, but it isn't comfort I want."

"What is it then?"

"Assurance. An answer. What made him die, Robin? How did he get the stuff that killed him? Did somebody give it to him? Was he—was he murdered?"

CHAPTER FOUR

AT Scotland Yard, late that Sunday afternoon, Superintendent William Austen, of the C.I.D. received instructions to go to Woodstock on a suspected murder case. He was to take with him Inspector Curtis and Sergeant Flyte. "For this relief, much thanks," he murmured to himself, for the three of them made, as he knew from experience, an excellent team.

Curtis was, in almost every way, his antithesis, which was part of their combined strength. Curtis curbed Austen's sometimes too active imagination, plodded conscientiously where he leapt, and, as he sometimes said, detected where he had inspirations.

Physically, they were complementary, too. Austen, tall, dark, with deep set blue eyes, was a distinguished figure, anywhere, while Curtis had the gift of looking utterly ordinary and could mix with any crowd and never be noticed.

Young Flyte, as they both called him, was a faithful disciple of them both and he had a hero worship for Austen, into the bargain, and copied his clothes, his mannerisms and his general attitude to life, so far as he was able. He was also a very astute young man with a real flair for his chosen job.

While he waited for the other two to join him, Austen

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stood as he so often did when he had time, looking out of his window, overlooking the Embankment, at the Thames, flowing gently along in the pale spring sunlight.

The door opened and Curtis and Flyte came in together.

"Hello! you two," he began. "All set? We're off to the country, did you know? Woodstock is our destination."

"Oxfordshire," Curtis remarked. "But just whereabouts I don't know."

"A few miles from Oxford. It's a perfectly charming village—where Blenheim Palace is."

"Sarah Duchess and all that?" Flyte asked.

"Yes. Built with difficulty—because she would keep interfering—mostly by Vanburgh and given to the first Duke of Marlborough by a grateful nation."

Curtis grinned happily. "Just the place for you to work in," he commented. "My question is, what are we doing there?"

"Suspected murder is the name they give it," Austen told him, "and it might be quite interesting. Breaks fairly new country, anyway. A Don, of one of the Oxford Colleges, was found dead in bed this morning. Was it murder? Accident? Or suicide? Over to us to decide. According to the locals, there's no pointer in any direction. That's all the information I've got, except that the wife writes detective stories. I think we'd better be on our way. We're going in my car and I'm driving, Flyte."

There was a chuckle at this, because Austen's own car was large and capable of considerable speed, and there was nothing that Flyte liked better than to be allowed to drive it. He was always making excuses—usually thwarted—to do so.

"We can go by way of your rooms to pick up your

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clothes," Austen went on. "We shall probably be away for several days. I'm calling in at my flat for my things, so, if you'll collect the murder bags, Flyte, we'll be off."

It was dark by the time they reached the Woodstock Police Station, where Inspector Harris was waiting for them. He was especially pleased to see Superintendent Austen, whom he knew well by repute and had been anxious to meet in person.

"Glad to see you," he greeted them. "You've been pretty quick. Our Chief Constable didn't make up his mind to 'phone the Yard till about teatime."

"We're pleased to come," Austen told him. "Oxfordshire in the Spring is just what was wanted. It's been a long, cold winter."

They exchanged the usual chit-chat for a few minutes and then Austen said: "Well, let's get the facts, shall we?"

Harris smiled ruefully. "That's the trouble, Sir. There are hardly any. Professor Waring was found dead in bed this morning, and the preliminary medical examination says that he died of an overdose of barbitone. Time of death still uncertain. The complete P.M. report will be available in the morning. And that's about all."

"About? Let's have the rest. I want details."

"Such as it is, here you are, Sir."

Harris picked up the notes he'd made that morning and read from them.

"The widow found him dead this morning—they occupied separate rooms—and she sent for the doctor who thought there was something fishy and sent for us."

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"When questioned by me, she gave the following account of events."

Harris repeated the information he had extracted from Juliet and then paused.

"That's all, Sir."

Austen thought that over. "What age was Waring?"

"Fortyish."

"And Mrs. Waring?"

"In her early thirties."

"How long have they lived in Woodstock?"

"Some years—eight, perhaps. Even since their marriage."

"Then you probably know something about them—personally, I mean. Local opinion; gossip. Did they get on well together?"

"Perfectly, Sir. Devoted couple, to all appearances."

"No domestic trouble, then, as a reason for suicide?"

"Absolutely not, I should say."

"Money worries?"

"I should say not. There appears to be plenty—very nice house, she's well dressed, they keep a full time maid and they both have cars. He must get a good salary and I'm told her books sell well."

"Enemies?"

"Both Mrs. Waring and the gentleman who was with her, say not."

"Do you think they were telling the truth?"

Harris hesitated. "They gave me that impression. Mrs. Waring is a very nice lady if I may say so. She was very much cut up and she'd had a bad shock, finding her husband dead, like that, but she'd got a good control of herself and she was trying to answer my questions properly."

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"I think I'd better go and see her."

Harris shook his head. "I'm afraid you can't, Sir. She's incommunicado till the morning. The doctor's given her a stiff sedative and he told me that if she was disturbed tonight, he'd have my hide."

"Oh Lord!" Austen sighed. "And it's Sunday, too. That means that I can't really get to work until the morning."

"That's so, I'm afraid."

Curtis put in his word then. "Inspector, what about these books and things that Professor Waring came to fetch? Had they gone?"

The Inspector looked rather disgruntled. "I never thought of that!"

"And how was he proposing to get back to Oxford?" Curtis pursued. "By car, I suppose, as you say he had one. What happened to it?"

Harris brightened. "I know that. He left it in the public car park and it's still there, the keys were in the Professor's pocket and I've got them here."

"The number?"

Harris told him and Curtis looked at Austen, who nodded.

"Go and have a look-see, Flyte," Curtis instructed, and the Sergeant went off, taking the car keys with him.

"Well," said Austen, reluctantly, "that seems about all for tonight. I suppose I'd better go and report to your C.C."

Harris was doubtful. "He didn't expect you until the morning, so if you don't want to, you needn't."

"Good. I don't want to, so I won't."

Harris looked relieved. "Just as well if I may say so,

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Sir. The Major isn't much of a one for being disturbed on a Sunday."

"Nor am I, Inspector, but no one seems to take any notice of that."

Harris chuckled and changed the subject. "Now, Sir, about where you're going to stay—"

"Don't worry about that. I've booked rooms for us at the Bear."

Harris was a little surprised at that, but when he'd had a look at Austen's car, he murmured "Private means there," to himself, and left it at that.

Flyte reappeared and the London men went on their way.

Robin was thoroughly worried about Juliet and, eventually, he rang up Dr. Ferris.

"She hasn't slept," he reported. "And she says that she can't. She's restless and can't concentrate. What am I to do? She looks utterly exhausted."

Ferris said: "I was afraid of something like that. I'd come over if I could, but I'm just off to an emergency case miles away. I'll leave some tablets for her at my house, if you could come and fetch them. Make her eat and then give her the tablets. She's resisting the sedative I gave her earlier, but this stuff will do the trick, I'm sure. And, Ridgeway, she's not to be disturbed by anybody. If the police want to ask her any more questions, tell them they can't. My orders. Have you got anyone to look after her, yet?"

"Not yet, but I will."

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"Good—someone who won't upset her, I hope. She mustn't be worried."

"I'll do my best," Robin promised and rang off.

He persuaded Juliet to go back to bed. He filled hot water bottles for her and tucked her up as if she were a baby. He poured a drink out for her—the last he could find in the house—and told her to finish it.

"I've got to leave you for half an hour," he said. "One or two jobs I must do. Will you be all right?"

She assured him that she would.

"If the door bells rings," he instructed, "take no notice of it. I've put the telephone out of action until I come back."

He collected the medicine from the doctor's house and then went to the Bear which had just opened. There he sought out the head waiter and confided in him.

The man hadn't yet heard of Waring's death and was tremendously interested. He knew both the Warings as customers, and was proud of Juliet, as a local celebrity.

"Leave it to me, Sir," he assured Robin. "Of course the poor lady must be tempted to eat and keep her strength up. A little good consommé and then some sole bonne femme. I'll send them over in about an hour, in covered casseroles. If they could be heated up—"

He gave his instructions about the best way to do that and then Robin went off to the bar.

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There, for the first time, he saw Superintendent William Austen.

He had no idea then, of course, just what that encounter was going to mean in his life. He only vaguely noticed a very distinguished looking man, in a most admirable tweed suit, talking to some others at the far end of the bar.

Robin bought various bottles from the barman and took them back to the house where he found Juliet looking rather worse than when he had left her.

Her small face looked smaller than ever, drained of all colour, her eyes seeming deeply sunk into their sockets and gazing into vacancy; the drink he had told her to finish was untouched.

With what seemed to be an effort, she focused her eyes on him.

"It is Sunday isn't it, Robin?" she asked.

"It is."

"Thank God for that!"

"Why?"

"There won't be any evening papers, so I needn't tell the parents about Jocelyn until the morning."

That gave him his opportunity. "Juliet, I've been wondering if you would like me to ring your parents up and break the news and ask them to come over and be with you."

"Oh no!" she cried, urgently. "That's just what I don't want."

"Your parents?"

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"My mother. I'd like father but he couldn't come without her. Mother's the nicest person, Robin, but she does fuss terribly and she's so—conventional. She'd expect me to behave like a sorrowing widow and cry on her shoulder and she'd be dreadfully hurt if I didn't, and I couldn't and everything would be more awful."

"They'll have to know, though, Juliet."

"Of course, but I think I shall be able to cope better in the morning. I thought I'd ring them up first thing, and say I'd been doped by the doctor, today, or something and not let their feelings be hurt."

"But you ought to have some woman here," he protested.

That didn't seem to appeal to her. "I don't want anyone but you. You—understand."

"Yes, but Dr. Ferris advised it. Isn't there anyone you'd like?"

"No, not *like*. If it would make it easier for you, I could bear Linda Burnett. She's comfortable and she never fusses. There's no one else."

"I'll ring her up," Robin said, and went to do so, but there was no answer.

When he came back, she said: "What happens now, Robin? An inquest, I suppose?"

"I expect so. Don't think about that, now."

"I can't help it. My mind goes round and round. I won't stop thinking. I can't see why or how or—"

"Stop that, Juliet. Try *not* to think. Look, finish that drink I gave you and you'll feel better."

He made her drink more than she usually did, hoping that it would dull her reactions, and then the dinner arrived

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from the Bear and they shared it and she managed to eat a reasonable amount.

Then he gave her the doctor's sleeping pills, refilled her hot water bottles and tucked her up for the night.

"I shall be within call if you want me," he assured her. "I'll leave your door ajar and I shall hear you. Sleep well, my dear."

He kissed her chastely on the cheek and she smiled a little and said: "You *are* good to me."

Several times in the next few hours, he rang up the Burnetts' house, but there was no reply, and at last he gave it up in despair, and settled himself down for the night as Juliet's sole guardian.

He looked in at her last thing and she was sleeping deeply and quietly—Dr. Ferris's prescription had worked at last.

Robin found a bed made up in the spare room and lay down to sleep there, leaving the door open, but there was no call from Juliet in the night, and she was still sleeping, though not quite so deeply, when sounds from the ground floor sent him downstairs shortly after eight o'clock.

They came from the kitchen, and when he opened the door, he saw that Alice was there.

She was a pleasant sight and entirely satisfying and normal in that house given over, now, to the abnormal. She was a woman of middle height, with dark hair and a clear, rosy complexion, and she exuded ordinariness and

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competence, as she stood by the cooker, neatly belted into a clean, starched blue overall, plugging in the electric kettle.

She almost jumped as he opened the door and she stared at him, for a second, in surprise and half recognition.

Then she said, in her pleasant, friendly voice: "Oh! Mr. Ridgeway, how you startled me!"

"And you, me," he answered her. "I didn't expect you back so early."

"I got a lift and didn't have to wait for the bus," she told him.

Then he said: "Well, I'm very very glad to see you. Alice, there's bad news—"

Her hand flew to her heart. "Not Mrs. Waring—?"

"No. The Professor. He's dead."

"Oh my God!" said Alice, plumping herself down quickly in a kitchen chair. "But he was all right Saturday lunch time when I left."

"Mrs. Waring found him dead in his bed yesterday morning," he told her.

"But he wasn't spending the night here," she protested. "He told me so. I asked him if I should get him some dinner ready before I went, and he said no, he'd be going back to Oxford before that."

Robin thought: That sounds less and less like suicide. He wondered how to explain to her that the police would find that an interesting piece of information—and decided not to.

"What sort of mood was he in?" Robin asked.

"Gay. Oh! very gay! He was having a party. But what did he die of, Mr. Ridgeway? Was it a heart attack?"

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He told her all he knew, which was very little, and it shocked her.

"I never liked him much," she stated, "but you wouldn't like that to happen to anyone would you? And Mrs. Waring to find him! Poor lady. Tell me about her."

"Well, she's not in a good state, as you'd imagine. She is being far too brave and self-controlled."

He explained as well as he could and Alice understood.

"Yes, she would be," she agreed. "Mrs. Waring's never one to show her feelings. I've heard him say horrid things to her and she's never shown she was hurt, but I knew she was. I know her. I've often thought it would have been better for her if she'd given him a piece of her mind. I would have. What's she doing now, poor thing?"

"Sleeping, I hope."

"Well, I'll just go up and see. If she's awake, I'll take her a nice cup of tea. I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but he never was good enough for her. Good thing I got back early, I'll look after her now."

There was no question about that. Alice took charge and everything thereafter seemed, somehow, more normal at once.

Robin rang up the Stewarts to break the news and they were, of course, horrified.

As Juliet had predicted, they wanted to come over at once and be with Juliet, but Mrs. Stewart sounded very emotional on the telephone and Robin put her off with various excuses. He thought that the longer she had to

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assimilate the unpleasant facts before she saw her daughter, the better, and it wasn't until about mid-day that the Stewarts arrived, and, when they did so, Juliet was closeted with Superintendent Austen, and couldn't be seen by anyone else.

* * * * *

Juliet wakened that Monday morning after her long, deep sleep, still bewildered, but once again in control of herself. The sense of horror which had preyed on her all yesterday was gone. She was suffering now mostly from the grief which attends the death of those cut untimely off, and a sense of loss. She had ceased, for the time being, to torture herself with questions.

Her drugged sleep had dulled the acuteness of her mind. She had become willing not to argue with herself, not to speculate. She was herself but less than herself. She functioned normally, but half her brain, she felt, was still asleep.

"I feel as if I'd drunk enough to make me comfortably hazy," she told Robin, when Alice at last let her see him, "but not enough to forget everything. The edge seems off, if you know what I mean."

"Let it stay like that and be thankful," Robin advised. "Don't meet anything half way."

* * * * *

Alice's treatment of the situation was thoroughly practical and full of sound common sense. Summed up it amounted to this:

Juliet's husband had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, and that was enough to give anyone a shock.

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Moreover, Juliet had been the one to find him dead. That made the shock greater.

Therefore, she must be treated for shock, kept warm and comfortable and protected from extra worries, but, being who she was, she must be brave and not give way to unreasonable grief.

The other implications of Jocelyn's death, the mystery of its manner, the police enquiries and all that kind of thing, Alice ignored—and expected Juliet to do the same.

Her attitude was very salutary and very helpful—Alice knew how a newly-made widow should behave—had she not, after all, been one herself, once?—and Juliet tried to conform, because it was easier to do so than to rebel.

Alice gave her the feeling that she would be, so to speak, letting the side down if she didn't keep to the rules.

By those rules Juliet should have wanted her mother, but Alice knew Juliet's reticent temperament and Mrs. Stewart's non-reticent one, and waived that bit of convention.

She did, however, insist on Juliet's putting on a dark dress when she let her get up, and on her lying down on the drawing room sofa and taking steps to "Keep up her strength", which meant raw egg beaten up with sherry, seeing that she refused all offers of Alice's panacea "A nice cup of tea".

William Auster was up in good time that morning. He breakfasted and then drove over to the Chief Constable's house to report; formally, the arrival of himself and his assistants.

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He was welcomed, given *carte blanche*, and that was about all. The C.C. had no further information for him, and appeared to be chiefly thankful that Scotland Yard had taken over the case.

Austen's next call was in Oxford. He had a few words with the Master of Leycester College and got the authentic information on Jocelyn Waring's scholastic background and status.

About his personal standing and character, the Master was non-committal and didn't sound over enthusiastic, but that was merely an impression which Austen received.

After leaving Leycester, he went to a bookshop, where he managed to get copies of the last two books by "Juliet Stewart", and, letting Flyte drive the car, glanced through them on the way back to Woodstock.

He could, of course, form no more than a very cursory opinion in the circumstances, but sentences which caught his eye suggested that the author was a woman of taste, of sensibility and considerable reasoning powers. He looked forward to a closer acquaintance with her works.

When William Austen made his appearance at Juliet's house, the door was opened to him by Alice, polite, but firm. "Mrs. Waring isn't well enough to see anyone."

"I'm afraid," Austen was equally firm, "she'll have to see me. I'm in charge of the enquiry into Professor Waring's death and I must ask her some questions. You see, Mrs.—" he had seen her wedding ring—

"Williams," she supplied.

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"—Mrs. Williams, there is a doubt as to whether it was an accident or suicide."

"Suicide it wasn't," she put in, quickly. "He was in one of his gay moods on Saturday, and I'll swear he never thought of such a thing."

By this time Austen had begun to sum Alice up. He said:

"I'd be glad if you'd tell me about that, Mrs. Williams. Is there somewhere we could go and talk quietly?"

"Well—" Alice hesitated—"If you wouldn't mind coming to my kitchen, it would be easier. I've got a stew on for Mrs. Waring's lunch and I don't like leaving it."

"Splendid," he agreed, and followed her on to, so to speak, her native ground.

As she said, afterwards, he was a very nice gentleman and she took quite a fancy to him and the other two he brought with him were very nice, too. They made themselves quite at home, she reported, and even asked her if there were anything they could do to help. As a matter of fact, young Flyte was put to peeling potatoes!

"Now," Austen began, when they were settled, "tell me about Saturday. I understand that Mrs. Waring was out all day."

"That's right, Sir. She told me, when I took her breakfast up to her—she always has it in bed—that she'd got a lot of engagements in Oxford, and she was going to see her father and mother, and she wouldn't be home till late and I needn't bother about meals for her—it was my week-end off, you see.

"She said the Professor would be in that day to fetch

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some books and things he wanted, but he wouldn't want a meal either.

"Well, she went out about ten and he turned up about eleven and I could hear him in his study."

"And he was in good spirits, you say?"

"Gay as a lark. I could hear him whistling to himself."

"And then?"

"Well, my bus goes at one, so I went and told him I should be going in an hour, and was there anything he wanted before I went.

"He said: 'Alice, I feel in a holiday humour. I'm going to throw a party. Can you make me some bits and pieces?'—he meant canapés and things—he always called them bits and pieces—so I said I hadn't time, but I'd leave some biscuits and olives and so on, on the kitchen table.

"Then I heard him telephoning and after a bit he came to me and said he was just going out for some bottles, and if anyone came before he got back, I was to show them to the drawing room.

"So I—"

"Half a minute," Austen interrupted her. "Let's just get this straight as we go along. This rather sudden idea of a party—did that surprise you?"

"Oh no, Sir! That was quite a usual thing with the Professor. He was always one for doing things like that on the spur of the minute. Many's the time I've heard him say to Mrs. Waring: 'I feel the party spirit coming on. Let's ask people in'."

"I see. Well, did anyone come before he got back?"

"There was a young lady—I don't remember her name—she came to see Mrs. Waring a week or so back. I don't

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think she's ever been here before that—very pretty she was—and a Mr. Roberts—he lives in the village—but no one else before I had to go. I nearly missed my bus as it was."

The next thing Austen wanted to know was: "What sort of terms were the Warings on? Did they get on well?"

"Better than most," Alice assured him.

"No quarrels?"

"I never heard any."

"Fond of one another?"

"Very."

"So you wouldn't think it likely that he committed suicide because of what they call 'domestic troubles?'"

Alice laughed, impatiently. "*He*, never committed suicide. Why should he? He had everything his own way and Mrs. Waring waiting on him hand and foot. It was always 'Just what *you'd* like' from her. She didn't mind how she put herself out if it would please him."

"A devoted wife, you'd say?"

"The best, Sir. I never saw a more unselfish one."

Austen asked quickly: "And would you have called him a devoted husband?"

That gave Alice pause. "Well, he was fond of her—but selfish. Still, of course, all men are, compared with their wives, I mean."

"Was he good tempered?"

"Mostly. If he got his own way—which he always did as far as she was concerned."

"I take it you didn't very much like him, Mrs. Williams?" Austen ventured.

"Not as much as her. She's too good for him, if you ask me, but he made her happy."

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Which, he felt, was an epitaph.

He could extract no more from Alice, and she presently took him to the drawing room, where Juliet was sitting with Robin Ridgeway.

William Austen had a theory, often vindicated, that, from the surroundings in which a person voluntarily lived, you could arrive at a side-light on his character.

He had appreciated the taste in furniture and decor in the small part of the house which he had already seen, and when he stepped into the drawing room, he knew that his first opinion was right.

The big, beautiful room, white panelled, was flooded with sunshine, which lit up furniture of loveliness and elegance, and brought out the richness of colour in the curtains and covers.

Flowers were everywhere; spring flowers, exquisitely arranged and grouped, speaking of hope and renewal, even in this house of death.

Juliet was sitting up on the sofa, her feet on a foot-stool and she looked up in surprise at Austen's entry.

He introduced himself fully and officially, and Curtis, and Flyte too, as his assistants.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," he said, "but I'll do so as little as possible. I just want to ask you a few questions."

"I've already told Inspector Hallis all I could," Juliet protested.

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"Yes, but I'm helping with this case, now, and I like to get my information first hand. Now, would you mind if, while we're talking, Inspector Curtis and Sergeant Flyte have a look at the room where Professor Waring was found?"

"Of course not," she answered, thinking that it would probably make no difference if she did mind.

She turned to Robin and introduced him. "Would you show them Jocelyn's room?" she asked him.

He went off with the other two detectives, leaving Juliet alone with Austen.

She invited him to sit down, but, before he could speak, Alice came in with a tray containing decanters of sherry and glasses, which she put down on a low table by Juliet's side. She had evidently decided that Austen was to be treated as an ordinary morning visitor.

She hovered a little over Juliet, exerting, as it were, her proprietary rights, straightened a cushion, made up the fire and then ceremoniously withdrew, shutting the door noiselessly behind her.

When she'd gone, Juliet put into words a thought which had been forcing itself on her mind.

"Surely, Mr. Austen, it's unusual for Scotland Yard to be called in on a simple case like this?"

"Simple?" he echoed. "I wouldn't call it that, up to the present. Where there's considerable doubt they often call us in, you know—the detached, outside view. And doubt there is here, as you must see for yourself. Mrs. Waring, there's no question here about an accident. Did your husband commit suicide, or was he murdered?"

CHAPTER FIVE

SHE made no attempt to answer that question. Instead, she completely changed the subject and became purely social.

"Sherry, Mr. Austen?" she enquired. "There's a brown, or a Fino which is pleasantly dry—"

"The Fino, please," he told her.

She poured out a glass for each of them. He took his, sipped it and then re-posed his question.

She looked at him with a kind of despair.

"I haven't the faintest idea," she said. "I've been over and over it and I can't see any answer. Nothing makes sense."

He leaned forward a little in his chair.

"Mrs. Waring, I know that you write detective novels. I haven't yet read any, but I understand that they are good ones. For my purpose, that implies two things; that you're familiar with police procedure and that you have a logical mind.

"Those things make it easier for me to talk to you—I shan't have so much to explain, and you'll follow my reasoning.

"Now, I've read Inspector Hall's report of his conversation with you, so we can use that as a basis—or is

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there anything that you said to him which you've changed your mind about now?"

"Nothing that I can remember."

"Right. We'll start from there. Now, you told him that you couldn't believe that your husband committed suicide, and I believe that you made that statement on psychological grounds? From your knowledge of him, you considered such a thing out of character? Correct?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen reason to alter that opinion?"

She paused before answering to collect her thoughts and put them into the right words.

Then she said: "Yes and no, Mr. Austen. I still can't believe that my husband was capable of taking his own life, but I'm almost compelled to believe that he must have done so."

"Why is that?"

"Because I can't see any alternative. I've been assured that an accident must be ruled out, so that if it weren't suicide, it must have been murder—and that's impossible."

"Is it? Why?"

He noted that she looked very tired and strained as she answered.

"Murder, to my mind, implies extremely strong feelings on the part of the murderer. Either he covets, passionately, something which he can only possess if his victim is dead, or he hates him almost insanely."

"Leaving out one or two other motives, Mrs. Waring, I agree with you, but I'll go with you all the way about the strong feelings."

She gave a little smile. "I know I'm theorising. I've never

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encountered murder or a murderer. You have, of course. But in this instance, I feel that I know at least as much as you. I know that no one had anything to gain by my husband's death, either monetarily or otherwise. I also know that no one hated him to the degree of murder."

"There," he contradicted her, gently, "you are wrong. You can't know. Think it out. How can you *know* that no one cherished murderous feelings towards your husband? You may think it unlikely, but you can't *know*."

"But he wasn't the sort of man to arouse feelings like that."

"Again, how can you be sure? Your husband may have had enemies—in his work, for instance—whom you've never met; whose names you've never even heard. Isn't that so?"

She had to admit it. "It's possible, I suppose."

"So you see, you can't state positively, that he was a man whom nobody would want to murder. As a matter of fact, I'm almost entirely convinced that somebody did."

She started forward. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you something that you didn't know, Mrs. Waring. The results of the post-mortem are to hand. Your husband died as the result of an overdose of one of the barbiturates, and it was administered by the mouth in solution.

"Now you will see what this means. The liquid must have been in some container and neither Inspector Harris nor Dr. Ferris could find such a thing anywhere. My men are having a look for it now. If it's not found, it completely rules out suicide. Except in books, suicide bothers, even if he's able, to hide the provenance of his means of death.

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A murderer does. Do you agree with that argument?"

"I suppose so." She was reluctant. "Why do you say 'except in books'?"

He laughed. "Well, I have read stories in which a man has committed suicide in circumstances which have been made by himself to look like murder—in order to incriminate someone else on whom he wants revenge. That doesn't seem convincing to me, but I don't say it *couldn't* happen, though I should be extremely reluctant to believe it. But, if such a case should occur, the dead man would be careful to lay a trail, before his death, pointing to the person he wants to incriminate. There is no such thing in this instance. You get my point?"

She nodded.

"Therefore, failing new and very conclusive evidence to the contrary, I shall approach this as a case of murder."

"How horrible," Juliet said, softly. "How utterly horrible."

"It is, I agree. Murder is always horrible.

"Now my next step is to find who had the opportunity to give your husband that lethal dose—I'm leaving the question of motive for the moment.

"Your maid tells me that, in your absence on Saturday, your husband had some people in to drinks before lunch."

"Oh!" Juliet exclaimed, surprised, "I didn't know that."

"I thought you said you found dirty glasses when you came home?"

"Yes, but I thought they were the evening's ones. I knew he'd had a party before dinner—at least, a friend of mine told me he'd rung up and asked her to come to one."

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"And did she?"

"No. She couldn't. She was expecting me to go and see her."

"Which you did?"

"Yes."

"Then I take it that you don't know whom your husband entertained on Saturday?"

"I haven't an idea."

"Well, Mrs. Waring, your maid knows who two of the people were who came in the morning. There was a Mr. Roberts—do you know him?"

She nodded. "Yes, slightly."

"And someone, she described as a very pretty young lady who came to see you one afternoon not long ago. Name not remembered. She'd never been here before that afternoon. Can you guess?"

A flush spread slowly and painfully over Juliet's pale face. Cecily Compton it must be, of course.

She said, slowly: "I think so. Cecily Compton is the only person who fits the description."

"An old friend?"

"Not of mine—one of my husband's students."

He left that for the moment.

"Now we come to your movements on Saturday. Will you tell me what you did all day?"

She felt easier for the turning of the subject away from Cecily.

"I drove to Oxford," she told him "and spent the day there. I had a number of appointments."

"Particularise, please."

She hesitated. "I went to my lawyers first—"

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He interrupted, "For what purpose?"

She hadn't expected that and had to improvise hastily.

"Something to do with a book contract."

He let that pass and he took her through her day's programme, item by item.

Then he asked, to her surprise: "Did you mention to anyone you met that your husband was going to be here alone?"

"I don't really know. Yes—I suppose so. It's quite likely, anyway. Why are you asking all these questions about my movements?"

"Just a matter of routine."

She smiled at that, rather wanly. "I seem to recognise that remark, Mr. Austen."

That made him laugh. "You've probably written it yourself quite a number of times. I can see that I shall have to be very careful of you, Mrs. Waring, if I suspect you of not telling me the whole truth. My usual gambits will be seen through."

She thought about that remark for quite a long time. Was he warning her? she wondered.

* * * * *

At last, when he'd got a list of names and addresses from her, he went to interview Robin Ridgeway, whom Curtis and Flyte had been keeping in play.

The Stewarts had arrived while Austen had been with Juliet, and Alice had immured them in the dining room, much to Mrs. Stewart's indignation.

So soon as Juliet was free, they rushed to her, and Austen

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was able to see Robin in the dining room.

"I shan't keep you long, Mr. Ridgeway," he began. "I understand that you are literary agent for both the Warings, and an old friend as well."

Robin agreed.

"Then, perhaps, to start with, you'd tell me something about Professor Waring?"

"What sort of thing?"

"His character; his disposition—whatever you like to call it. I understand from Inspector Harris that you agreed with Mrs. Waring as to the unlikelihood of his committing suicide. Why do you feel that way about him?"

Robin thought for a moment. "Well," he said, at last, "I shall have to begin by telling you that I never particularly liked him. He was a man whom very many people fell for, heavily, particularly women. He was very good looking and had a great deal of charm. But, in my opinion, he used it to hide a good many faults."

"Such as?"

"Well—he was a bad loser. If things didn't go the way he thought that they ought to—in his favour—he couldn't take it.

"Nothing was ever his fault. Someone else was always to blame and he worked off his grievances on other people."

"On his wife, for instance?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't sound especially non-suicidal."

Robin smiled. "Perhaps not, but it works out that way, in my opinion. All that was the result of utter self-confidence and conceit. I don't think that people like that think of killing themselves. They're too pleased with themselves.

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They'd be more likely to think of killing the people they blame for their failures. Not, of course, that Waring was, actually, murderously inclined, but that's the general attitude."

"I see. You say he was attractive to women. Do you think he was unfaithful to his wife?"

Austen noticed Robin's hesitation before he answered.

"I wouldn't know."

"I didn't say know, Mr. Ridgeway. I said think."

Again Robin hesitated. "Well then, I think it's likely."

"Did Mrs. Waring know about it?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"I can't tell you. All I can say is that his flirtations were common talk and that all her friends concluded that she couldn't be aware what was going on."

"Would she have minded if she had known?"

"What wife wouldn't?"

"As you say, but some more than others. Did Mrs. Waring care greatly for her husband?"

"She was devoted to him."

Austen stirred in his chair and began to fill his pipe.

"Well, that's all a help, Mr. Ridgeway. One hears something from one person, something from another, and gradually one begins to build up the character of a murdered man, and see why someone might have wanted to murder him. Can you, yourself, make any suggestions as to anyone who hated him enough to do that? A discarded mistress, for instance?"

Robin shook his head. "Not hatred, not to that extent. He certainly could arouse resentment, dislike—and perhaps,

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in some cases, jealousy of his achievements—but no more or worse. As to women, I just wouldn't know."

"Had you anyone in mind when you said jealousy?"

"Oh no! Certainly not."

Austen felt sure that he was lying about that, to some extent, but perhaps Ridgeway could only hazard guesses and felt it wasn't fair to do that. Anyway he left the subject.

"Now," he said, "I'd like you to give me an account of how you spent Saturday; the people you met and so on."

Robin looked surprised. "I don't quite see what that's got to do with Waring's death."

"Just routine," Austen told him, smiling inwardly. "One likes to get a general picture, you know."

"I shall have to think. So far as I remember, I stayed at home, reading manuscripts until about noon. Then I met Mrs. Waring for a drink at the Mitre. I'd hoped she'd lunch with me, but she had some appointment."

"A man ran into me—as a matter of fact it was Hentshell, the chap who specialises in Waring's subject—I'm his agent, too—and we lunched together."

"What did you talk about? Waring?"

"No; or only indirectly. Waring's subject would be more correct. Hentshell's writing a book on it."

"And then?"

"About three I went back home and spent the rest of the day there. I'd a lot to do and I wanted to finish it off. Bar half an hour in the evening, when I went into a pub for a drink, I didn't go out again all day."

"Did you meet anyone in the pub?"

"No one I knew. I spoke to one or two men at the bar

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but I haven't an idea who they were."

Austen got up from his chair. ❹

"Well, thank you, Mr. Ridgeway. That's all for today."

❶ Juliet only had one conversation of any importance with her parents that morning.

When the first impact of their meeting was over, she said :

"I want you both to promise that you won't tell the police that I was going to divorce Jocelyn."

The Stewarts, naturally, wanted to know why.

She said: "Because I want to keep that poor child out of it if I can."

Mrs. Stewart was indignant, "I don't see why you should protect her!" she cried. "She'd done wrong; she deserves to suffer for it."

"I don't feel like that, Mother. She's only a silly romantic child, led on by Jocelyn's promises and misrepresentations. I don't think she should suffer for her mistakes. At her age, it might do her tremendous harm to have her name dragged into a rather sordid and unsavoury affair."

Ian Stewart said, reasonably: "But if she's been cited in your divorce case—"

"I was going to avoid that, Father. Goodness knows Jocelyn seems to have been involved with plenty of other women. I told the lawyer to try to find one less—less vulnerable than this child."

"People shouldn't be allowed to escape punishment which they've deserved," Mrs. Stewart stated.

Her husband rebuked her, gently: "You are being a prig,

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my dear. If Juliet wishes to take up this charitable attitude—which I admire—it isn't for us to thwart her. Jocelyn's conduct in that instance can have no bearing on his death, so we shall not be impeding the police in their investigations if we fail to mention it."

"That's what I think, Father," Juliet agreed.

"Of course, my child, that is as far as I am prepared to go. I can't and won't lie. If I am asked a direct question, I must either refuse to answer it, or tell the truth. There is one comfort, though; I haven't the faintest inkling as to who this girl is."

It was nearly time for lunch when William Austen left the Stone House, and met Curtis and Flyte in the bar of the Bear.

"Any progress?" Curtis asked him, when they'd ordered their drinks.

"Some," Austen said. "Mrs. Waring is a charming woman and an intelligent one. She's hiding something and I can't make out what. She's not frightened, she appears perfectly self-controlled, but she knows something that she doesn't want me to.

"Ridgeway's being a bit cagy, too. He's in love with her and he's out to protect her. He has obviously got the idea that when a husband is murdered, the wife is the chief suspect, and he's out to prevent that, if he can.

"He gave me a considerable side-light on the late Waring, who doesn't seem to have been what you might call a particularly worthy character, but he's sure that no one had

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a motive for murdering him, and no one was going to benefit from it.

"What did you two turn up? Anything of interest?"

"Quite a lot," Curtis reported. "First of all, there's nothing in Waring's quarters which could have contained the barbitone."

"From which we infer that murder is almost certain," Austen commented.

"Yes. But another curious thing emerged. It looks as though Waring was preparing to leave that house for good, not just collecting a few books to work with."

That made Austen whistle softly. "What gives you that idea?"

"Well, firstly, his wardrobes and chests of drawers were empty—not so much as a shirt stud left. The bookcases were completely empty too, and a couple of pictures had recently been removed from the walls.

"The maid, Mrs. Williams, knew nothing about all that, but she admitted that Waring hadn't been sleeping at home lately, and that Mrs. Waring had been in rather low spirits."

"This sounds suggestive," Austen murmured.

"I think so. Anyway, I had an idea and hunted up the local carrier, who said that he'd been engaged to collect a whole lot of stuff from the house on Saturday afternoon and deliver it at Waring's rooms in Oxford the same day—and was paid extra for working on a Saturday.

"I asked him what the stuff comprised and he said a lot of suitcases, masses of books—for which he provided boxes—a small bookcase, a desk and a few small pieces of furniture."

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"From which we infer," said Austen, smiling, "that that ménage was in process of disintegration. Or do we? He could have decided, I suppose, to do all his work in College and none at home—but the clothes rather give the show away, don't they?"

"Now, I wonder if that's what Mrs. Waring was trying to keep from me? If so, it wasn't very intelligent of her not to guess that we'd get onto it sooner or later. I think that's very significant. Anything else?"

Curtis shook his head and then Flyte made his report about Waring's car.

"There was a box in it, Sir, with a couple of bottles of whisky and some syphons and an overnight case with pyjamas and stuff."

"I found out why the car had been left in the Market Square. It seems that neither of the Warings ever park in front of their own door. It blocks the traffic, or something and they once had a car badly damaged there, since when they either park in the Square or garage their cars."

"I don't think that's a bad morning's work," Austen approved. "We're quite a bit further on. Now, I'll just give you two an idea of this afternoon's jobs and then we'll have lunch. Another pint first, though, I feel."

Austen's first job after lunch was to interview Cecily Compton, whom he had tracked down with the help of Inspector Harris.

She lived with her parents on the outskirts of the village, in a small, modern house.

She was extremely startled when she opened the door to

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what she afterwards described to one of her friends as: "The most distinguished man; not exactly good looking, but terribly striking and with the most marvellous smile."

She was still more startled when he introduced himself as a detective from Scotland Yard, and a little frightened when he said that he'd come to see her.

She stood at the door as if not knowing what to say or do, and with the quickness and ease of long experience he glanced at her, and assimilated her characteristics.

She was a very pretty girl, younger than her years in some ways, he thought, with the kind of prettiness which would fade when youth was over, and she had been crying. Her eyelashes were still wet.

Actually she had been crying ever since she had heard the news of Jocelyn Waring's death, which had reached her, after the manner of villages, in the grocer's, where she was doing her mother's shopping.

Gossip flies round, in the country, with a rapidity which African tom-toms might envy. Rumours have only to be started at one end of a village and they reach the other end in what seems like supersonic speed, so enhanced and embellished that their originators would hardly recognize them.

The story of Waring's death had had a bad start because it happened on Sunday, after church time and when all the shops were shut, but it had got going, tentatively, on Sunday evening after the pubs opened.

Dr. Ferris and Inspector Harris had been seen going into and coming from the Waring's house; an ambulance had been seen outside it.

That was enough. By closing time you could take your

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choice. Jocelyn had had a fatal accident ; his car had been seen in flames and he'd been burnt to death. Juliet had been attacked by a masked burglar and was at the point of death. He had murdered her in a fit of insanity. They were both dead—a suicide pact. And so on.

The Warings of course, were unusually gossip-worthy, she a crime writer, he an 'Oxford Don'; and she at least, was well known and liked in the village. She shopped locally, paid her bills regularly, and was always friendly when one met her.

By Monday morning, however, fact had begun to supersede fiction, and when Cecily Compton went out to do the shopping, it was known that Jocelyn Waring was dead and the cause of his death a Mystery. It was rumoured that Scotland Yard detectives had been called in.

Cecily left her shopping half finished, and rushed home to cry. It was an awful shock, naturally, for she had been with Jocelyn, alive and well, on Saturday.

She was thankful that her parents were out for the day and gave herself up to tears—and memories.

She forgot, in her very real sorrow, all that she had previously suffered at Jocelyn's hands. She remembered only that she had loved him dearly—too dearly—that he was her first love—and, as she believed in her young grief, her last.

Added to that, though as yet she didn't recognize it for what it was, there was a sense of importance as well as of excitement, that she had known the dead man so well.

So yet another emotion entered her mind when a Superintendent from Scotland Yard came to see her.

She stood on the doorstep staring at him, not knowing

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what to say or do, feeling gauche and conscious of her tear-stained face and lack of make-up.

He spoke to her kindly. "I want to ask you a few questions, Miss Compton. Could we go somewhere where we can talk quietly?"

She led him into a pleasant suburban sitting room where a fire was burning comfortably, and asked him to sit down.

"You've heard of Professor Waring's death?" he began.

"Oh yes! Isn't it terrible! I can hardly believe it. It's upset me dreadfully. It's so sad."

Tears came into her eyes again. "Why! It was only on Saturday that I was in his house, having a drink with him."

"That's why I've come to see you. You must have been one of the last people to see him before his death. You can help me, if you will. I'm trying to find out something about his state of mind that day."

"His state of mind?" she repeated.

"Yes. Was he gay or gloomy? Did he seem depressed about anything? Worried? Upset?"

She thought, then shook her head. "No, he was just as usual. He was in one of his good moods. Sometimes he'd be awfully silent, but on Saturday he was cheerful and full of fun."

"You knew him well?"

She caught her breath. "We were great friends."

"So you would notice if he'd behaved as though he had something on his mind, for instance?"

"Oh yes!"

"Now, I understand that he asked you to a party which he got up on the spur of the moment?"

She didn't even wonder how he knew that. Emotion and

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remembrance were in charge now, and the small brain wasn't even trying to function.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, he did."

"Now, would you tell me about that party—from the beginning—what he said when he asked you and so on. Everything that you can remember, in fact."

She didn't even pause for thought.

"Well, he rang me up—"

"At what time?" he interrupted.

"It must have been about twelve, because I remember I'd just put my watch right by the Church clock—the one that plays tunes, you know. They had it on the B.B.C.—"

He left her as far as possible to herself, guessing that he'd do more harm than good by trying to keep her to a straight narrative.

When he'd heard about the clock and its accomplishments, he recalled her, gently.

"So he rang you up soon after noon. What did he say?"

Tears welled again. "He said: 'Cecily, I'm feeling in a party humour. Come and have a drink and let bygones be bygones'."

Busy with remembrance, she'd forgotten the implication of those words and flushed scarlet when she heard her own voice saying them.

Austen pounced on them, without appearing to do so.

"What did he mean by that? Had you quarrelled?"

She nodded.

"Seriously?"

"We—we disagreed about something—" she tried to sound casual— "And I was very cross."

He helped her out. "So you made it up on the tele-

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phone and said you'd go to his party?"

She seized that, eagerly. "Yes, that's right."

"Did you go at once?"

"Well, I had to change, of course, for I'd only got an old jumper and skirt on."

"Did Professor Waring tell you that his wife wouldn't be there?"

She caught her breath. "He did just mention it, I think."

"Well, you changed and went. What time did you get there?"

"Oh! I don't know. About a quarter to one, I should think. You see, I had to change quite a lot—my stockings, too. I'd only got thick ones on—and do my hair again, and it's the best part of ten minutes walk."

"Was anyone else there?"

"No when I got there."

"But someone came after?"

Just a few minutes. I'd hardly time to say a word to Jocelyn before he turned up."

"Who turned up?"

"Mr. Roberts."

"Who's he?"

"Rather a queer little man. He lives in the village, but I'd never spoken to him before. Then she came."

"Who's she?"

"The woman—I don't know her proper name. Everyone called her Margot. I didn't like her much."

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "I don't know exactly. She was—well, she kept making jokes I didn't understand and she—well, she treated Jocelyn as if he belonged to her and he didn't seem

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to mind. She was beautifully dressed, I'll say that. In fact, I wished I'd put on ~~my~~ black. I would have done if I'd known anyone like that was going to be there. It's very smart and it makes me look older and she looked all *Vogue*, you know, and spoke to me as if I were a child."

Austen said, when she paused: "Did you three make up the whole party?"

"Oh no! Several other people came."

"Who were they?"

"I simply haven't a clue. I'd never seen them before. I don't even know what their surnames were. They all called each other "Darling" and that kind of thing."

"The men too?"

"Well, not Jocelyn, but Mr. Roberts and there was a woman—one of the artistic kind, with her hair scraped straight back and a sort of smock on and slacks—her name was Dolores—at least they called her that, but I shouldn't think it was likely, would you?"

"Did they all seem to know each other?"

"Well, no. Mr. Roberts and a young man named Percival who was there are, of course, friends, but the others were strangers, I think."

"How long did this party go on?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It rather felt like hours, because I was a bit bored, and there was no chance of speaking to Jocelyn. They went, at last, and I was simply ravenous and then Jocelyn said we'd go and get some lunch. And then, just as we were going out he said: "That party was rather fun, wasn't it? Seeing them all at each other's throats and mine. I think we'll continue it later. I'm just in the mood for that kind of thing."

CHAPTER SIX

“AND did the party go on?” Austen asked.

She nodded. “We went out to lunch and when we got back I wanted to go home, but Jocelyn wouldn’t let me. He said: ‘I’m going to ask all the people I can think of who loathe either me or each other or both, and I want you as a nice contrast’. So I stayed. I wish I hadn’t. It was *hateful*!”

Her high young voice was emphatic.

Austen asked: “Why?”

“They were such horrid people. That nasty little Roberts man was there again and they all hated each other. Jocelyn was quite right about that. They were beastly to me and they said catty things to each other and to him and there was only one person who was any way decent.”

“Who was that?”

“Dr. Hentshell. He’s a D.Litt. or something, not a real doctor. He’s a queer old thing and I think he felt as much out of it as I did. Jocelyn tried to make him quarrel about a book or something, but he wouldn’t. He said: ‘We shall never agree about that, Waring, so let us agree to differ’. And then he came and talked to me, which was nice of him.”

“How long did this party go on?”

“I wouldn’t know. I got simply fed up with it and I knew

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I'd had quite enough to drink and I thought I'd better go. So I said goodbye to Jocelyn and asked when I should see him again and he said he was going to stay in Oxford for a bit—he'd fix something up later, and then—you could have knocked me down with a feather—Dr. Hentshell said he'd walk part of the way home with me."

"And he did?"

"Yes, believe it or not, because it was quite out of his way—he was going to get the Oxford bus. And he was so nice. He said he was afraid I hadn't enjoyed myself very much and he was surprised that Jocelyn should have asked me there with those people. He said they weren't suitable company for a girl and he wouldn't have gone himself if he'd known they were going to be there."

"Who were the people, Miss Compton?"

"I simply haven't the foggiest idea. I'd never seen them before and I hope I never do again."

"Were they locals?"

"Oh no! I should think they all came from Oxford, by the way they talked. I never even heard their names."

"How many of them were there?"

"There were five women and three men. That's all I know."

"Now, Miss Compton, think carefully, please. You're sure that Professor Waring intended going to Oxford that evening?"

She flushed, hotly, though at the time he couldn't imagine why.

"Quite certain," she said.

Austen felt that there was nothing more to be learnt from her at that juncture. When he had gleaned more from other

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sources, he might have some more questions to ask her, but not just now.

His next call was at the house of Mr. Aubrey Roberts.

It was a Tudorish cottage, very deliberately old world and quaint, its walls criss-crossed with a multiplicity of beams, some genuine but most bogus, and the self-consciously cottagey garden was embellished with plastic statuettes and bird baths.

The front door, heavily iron bound and studded, was adorned with an enormous brass knocker, which Austen used with discretion, and the door was opened by a round little man of about forty, with rosy cheeks and thinning curly hair, well spread over the gaps.

He took Austen's card in plump, beautifully manicured fingers and read it, a smile growing on his lips as he did so.

Then he looked up and positively beamed.

"The police!" he exclaimed, in a high but fruity voice. "How too exotic! Scotland Yard and all that! My dear Sir, I am *delighted* to see you. This will be a big day in my life. All my friends will envy me. I shall dine out on it for weeks. Such a story—a great big policeman and poor little me! Have you come to arrest me? Shall I be thrown into jail? This is too devastatingly exciting. Now you must, you simply *must* come inside and tell me what I've done."

He led the way into a room so would-be Tudor that no Tudor could possibly have lived in it.

The periods had got a bit mixed, but the intention was there.

Antiques in Birmingham brass hung between the beams,

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on the walls—warming pans, sconces, shovels and horse brasses jostled one another. Cross stitch covers adorned the chairs and footstools; joint stools took the place of occasional tables. The fire burnt on an open brick hearth on immense dogs, and smoked desultorily.

The electric lights were concealed in brass lanterns and Austen almost expected to see rushes—synthetic ones—on the floor.

The little man preceded him, babbling continuously, and Austen made no attempt to stop him. That kind of chatter can come, as he well knew, from nervousness or a guilty conscience, and may easily give away more than the chatterer intends or knows.

Roberts begged him to sit down, pulling forward a rush seated chair for him.

"Scotland Yard in my little house," he twittered. "What an honour for me. Now, don't tell me what you've come about. Let me guess. It's our poor dear dead Jocelyn. Am I right?"

He waited for an answer, this time.

"Yes," Austen said. "How did you know?"

"The little grey cells, my dear man. I *adore* detective stories, don't you? But of course you don't. You *live* them!"

"How did you know he was dead?"

"Ah! I have my spies. Actually, I heard it at the butcher's, when I was buying my meagre little cutlet this morning. What a shock it gave me! And then I thought: Aubrey, my dear, the police will want to see you. You must have been one of the last people to see the poor pet alive."

"How do you make that out?"

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"Well, he was found dead in his bed on Sunday morning, wasn't he, or so rumour says, and there's some quite *thrilling* mystery about how he died, and I said goodnight to him about eight on Saturday, so my little grey cells tell me that he can't have seen many people after that. Am I right, Mr. Superintendent?"

Resisting a strong desire to kick the little man hard, Austen said: "I thought you were at the Warings' in the morning?"

"So I was, but I went back in the evening, too. When I went in the morning, Jocelyn, poor sweet, said he was enjoying his party and thought he'd go on with it in the evening and I was to come back if I felt like it. Well, to tell you the truth, I'm just a teeny weeny bit of an intellectual snob and one does like to know people like the Warings, and I'd never been asked to the house before. I've met them *out*, you know, but nothing *intime*, so I thought I'd go back. But one mustn't seem too eager, must one, so I went a bit late."

"What time do you call late?"

He looked thoughtful. "At a guess, about a quarter to seven."

"And you left?"

"It must have been just before eight."

"Were you the last to go?"

"Oh no! Les girls stayed on to finish their free fight, I expect. Oh! they *were* having fun."

"So you were there twice," Austen recalled him, firmly. "Will you tell me who the other guests were, both times?"

"Well, in the morning it was all a bit *scanty*, if you

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know what I mean. There were a couple of Jocelyn's ex-girl friends, simply hating one another—such fun! and his present one, poor moppet.

"What sort of a mood was Waring in?"

"Oh gay—and just if you ask me, just a teeny weeny bit catty, though they do say one mustn't speak ill of the dead, but he was having such *fun*, and setting them all at each other's throats, especially in the evening, and so very witty."

He was thoroughly enjoying his gossip, and went on to give Austen samples of the conversation which had so amused him, until he was interrupted.

"Now, Mr. Roberts," Austen asked him, "Tell me who was there in the evening."

"Well, there was still the little moppet—Cecily something or other—and between you and me, she shouldn't have been there, I felt. After all, there is something about considering the young person, isn't there? And two of the women were—well, they still manage to keep their amateur status, don't ask me how!"

By the time Austen had finished with him, Roberts was purring like a pussy cat full of cream. All in the odour of sanctity, so to speak, he had had the gossip of a life time, relieved himself of a lot of pent up spite, and put, he greatly hoped, cats among the pigeons.

His answer to the last question Austen asked him, gave him a lot of satisfaction.

"You say," said the Superintendent, "that Waring deliberately stirred up trouble among all those people; do you think he made any of them so angry that they'd feel like murdering him?"

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"Murder!" Little Roberts squealed. "Of course not! He was very, very naughty, but it was all such fun. I shouldn't think there was one of them who wouldn't have put a dollop of poison in his drink if he'd had such a thing on him—but Murder! I never heard such nonsense."

"Were you angry, Mr. Roberts?"

"Me! Of course not. I wasn't involved. I didn't know any of them—not to say know—I was only the observer, the child taking notes. I was just enjoying myself."

Then, just as Austen was on the doorstep, about to leave, Roberts, with a malicious little smirk, volunteered a piece of information; putting it cunningly, in the form of a question.

"Is it true," he asked, slyly and with evident relish, "that the Warings were going to be divorced?"

That, though he didn't show it, brought Austen up on his mental toes.

"I hadn't heard of it," he said, quickly. "Who told you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I heard it from Jocelyn himself, poor pet. It was something he said to the little Compton, just as she was going. She went up, all shy and—well, you could almost call it cringing—to him, to say goodbye, and she murmured something about 'When am I going to see you again?'—I wasn't listening, of course, but I just *happened* to be standing near—and he said 'God knows. I don't know what I shall be doing. My wife's going to divorce me. She won't succeed if I can help it—' and then he said in the most hurtful way, with what I should almost call a sinister laugh—'But if she does bring it off, don't imagine that I shall make an honest woman of you,

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my child!' Well, I ask you! That wasn't really *kind*, was it?"

"Do you think he meant it?"

Roberts shrugged his shoulders. "How would I know? One wouldn't be surprised, of course. Juliet has had a lot to put up with, poor sweet. Jocelyn wasn't exactly the faithful type."

"And if Mrs. Waring did take divorce proceedings, do you think he would have contested them?"

"Well, Superintendent, wouldn't you? After all, she *was* the breadwinner, and Jocelyn did like his little comforts and she *did* provide them in quite a *big* way."

That gave Auster quite a lot to think about. It also provided the answers to several questions which he had been mentally asking.

He left Aubrey Robert's little nest with a list of the people whose names the little man knew, who had been at Jocelyn's party and then drove himself to Oxford, where he was lucky enough to find Osbert Hentshell at home.

Cecily Compton's way of speaking of Hentshell had led him to expect someone rather dessicated and elderly.

Instead he found that Hentshell wasn't much over forty and very much alive, a blonde big man, correct and academic, but Austen expected that there were banked down fires under the slightly chilly exterior.

He said that he had already heard of Waring's death, and had been greatly shocked. He would not have considered him a suicidal type—but of course, one never knew with these highly strung people.

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When Austen told him that it wasn't suicide, but almost certainly murder, he was horrified, and, at first, incredulous.

He was perfectly frank about the party.

"I should not have gone, Superintendent, had I expected to find such a curious collection of people there. Waring and I have academic interests in common, and when he rang me up and suggested that I should come and have a chat and a drink with him on Saturday evening, I imagined that we should be alone."

"And you found all sorts of other people there?"

"I did, unfortunately."

"Did you know any of them previously?"

He shook his head. "Not personally, except a young lady—a Miss Compton—whom I had met once or twice, and whom I felt should not have been in a gathering of that kind."

"Will you explain what you mean by that, Doctor."

Hentshell hesitated a second.

"I do not wish to be too censorious," he said, at last. "But there were some women there of what one can only call doubtful reputation, and the general conversation was quite unfit for the hearing of a young girl. Waring has the reputation of giving rather—er—ill assorted parties in his rooms—that is, quite another matter. This was in his own house. I can only suppose that the absence of his wife led him to be—indiscreet."

"Quite. Waring didn't strike you as being depressed, Doctor?"

"On the contrary. He was in high spirits and seemed to regard the rather quarrelsome atmosphere he had created as highly amusing."

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"You say quarrelsome—was anyone sufficient upset, shall we say, to be driven into a murderous frame of mind?"

Hentshell smiled. "Such a thing never entered my head, Superintendent, but the answer is emphatically no. Most of the people there were undoubtedly annoyed, either with Waring or with one another, but that, I think, is the utmost that one can say. I felt so out of place that I took the opportunity of leaving early and accompanied Miss Compton home before anyone else went—about 7.30. at a guess."

"Dr. Hentshell, would you give me your impression of the Waring menage? I gather that you knew them both quite well."

"Yes," he said, deliberately. "Yes, quite well, socially. We were on dining terms, as one may say. A united couple, I think one may state—to all appearances, at any rate. Mrs. Waring is a charming woman, well read, well informed and above the average in intelligence. Waring was a trifle—I don't quite know how to put it—not unbalanced, but, shall we suggest, moody, but a man of undoubted charm and ability. He had a superior mind—when he could take the trouble to use it."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Indeed, Superintendent, I find it difficult to be explicit about that. I can only give you my own perhaps over-academic opinion. I would, perhaps, put it another way. My impression is that he was not a true scholar in the sense that he demanded truth, however difficult it might be to find. His mind was too volatile, and if it were led down interesting paths, it followed them. I believe, also, that he would, from time to time, become weary of research and take the

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easy way. He would assume that certain premises were correct, and argue from them.

"But that is merely my personal view, and will certainly throw no light on Waring's death, which is what you are enquiring about."

• "One never knows where the light will come from," Austen told him. "As a matter of fact, anything which illuminates the character of a man who has been murdered, may light up his murderer."

William Austen had a few rules in regard to his job which he never broke if he could help it. One was, never to talk shop at meal times. Another, never willingly to work late at night. What he liked was to review his day's findings during the evening, think them over and see where the pieces fitted and then forget about it all until morning.

That was a counsel of perfection, of course, but it paid handsome dividends if it were possible to enforce it.

In this instance, he set out to do it. He and Curtis and Flyte met together before dinner in his bedroom and reported on the day's findings.

Curtis began. "We saw the M.O. who did the P.M. and his report is interesting. I'll sum it up; you can see the figures later.

"First, what killed Waring was barbitone—not a terrible lot, only just a lethal dose, in fact. It was taken in liquid form, but that could mean that it was dissolved in something. When is another matter. As you know yourself, the stuff can have a delayed action. Also, the stomach content

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doesn't tell much, because he ate no solid food after lunch time on Saturday. He seems to have subsisted on olives and potato crisps and alcohol from then till he died.

"Time of death: between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Time of ingestion of barbitone quite uncertain, but between the same hours."

Austen thought that over. "So it could have been slipped into his drink any time during that party. Well, what next?"

Curtis took up his tale.

"Well, that lawyer you got the name of from Mrs. Waring—the one she went to see on Saturday—specializes in divorce—does practically nothing else, I should imagine.

"He confirms that she went to see him when she says she did, but he was very cagey when I asked what about."

Austen laughed. "Well, that didn't surprise you, I take it."

"Naturally. Lawyers have to be like that. He didn't say that it *wasn't* about a divorce, though. Flyte covered the rest of her movements on Saturday."

"All audited and found correct, Sir," Flyte reported. "She did just what she said she did—but there's a gap which can't be confirmed."

"The time she says she was shopping?"

"Yes. She left her hairdresser's at about three and she got to her parent's house after five thirty. Her version, as you gave it to me to check, was vague. She went to the market, she thinks she went to Elliston and Cavell's and one or two other places, but she 'doesn't quite remember'. Don't women always remember the shops they go into, Sir?"

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Austen smiled. "How would I know? Perhaps not, if their minds are preoccupied with other things."

"Such as murdering their husbands?" Flyte put in, promptly.

"Oh! So that's your idea, is it?"

"Well, I wouldn't say *idea*, but she *could* have done it, you know. She had a car; she knows the road from Oxford to Woodstock off by heart and she could have done the trip pretty quickly, laid the poison and got back to Oxford and done a bit more shopping and turned up at the Stewarts as scheduled."

"There's a certain amount in the theory," Austen admitted. "I've been hearing a few odd things this afternoon."

He told them the salient points of his various interviews.

"So we'll sum up the case against her."

"There's no doubt that, according to Flyte, she could have done it, if she were in possession of the poison. How she laid it, is another matter, but it could have been done, I don't doubt."

"Basing the argument on the gossip I heard—and most of it is gossip—Waring was flagrantly unfaithful to her. She was devoted to him but—Hell hath no fury,—as is well known."

"The worm turns and she decides to divorce him. He says he'll contest the divorce, so she decides to get rid of him finally. How's that?"

Curtis said: "It holds water. There's another thing, too. That chap Ridgeway is in love with her—it stands out. What's more, he spent last night alone in the house with her."

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"Did he now? Does he admit it?"

"Makes no bones about it. Says she couldn't be left alone and there was no one else."

"It could be true," Austen put in, mildly.

Curtis broke in. "Hold on a minute. He could have done it as easily as she could. When I saw him, this afternoon, he couldn't improve on his account of his Saturday afternoon's movements. Said he was reading manuscripts until he went to a pub in the evening. That bit's true. He's well known there. But reading manuscripts—that's not a thing you can prove. There's nothing to show for it, as you might say. He could have driven over here and laid the poison and been back in Oxford all within an hour."

"Well," said Austen. "There's a bad flaw in both those arguments. We've used the phrase 'laid the poison'. What does it mean? That someone put the stuff into something that Waring would be likely to take—what, for instance?"

"An aspirin bottle?" Flyte hazarded.

"You can't say he'd be *likely* to take it. Besides, it had been dissolved.

"No, I'll give you a better theory, I think. Either Mrs. Waring or Ridgeway—assuming that Curtis is right and he's in love with her and therefore has a motive—or both of them, if you like, knew that Waring was having a party that evening, and waited for the guests to go and then went to the house and she said 'let's make it up and be friends and have a drink on it' and slipped the stuff into his glass—You noticed, in Harris's report that she'd washed up all the glasses, though she said it was late and she was tired. If either of those two did it, I think it must have been worked something like that."

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"She's the more likely one," Flyte opined. "Women take naturally to poison."

Austen turned sharply. "That, my lad, is an old wives' tale. Women are cleverer than men in its use, that's all. They're quicker to seize opportunities and they're more likely to have access to it—the Keepers of the Medicine cupboard and all that. Have you any special reason for suspecting Mrs. Waring?"

"No," Flyte admitted. "But I suppose it's natural to suspect the wife first, when a husband's murdered."

"And vice versa. I'll give you that, particularly when the method is poison, because its administration often depends on knowing the habits of the victim."

Curtis spoke then. "I've no particular feelings for or against Mrs. Waring's guilt, but on the supposition that the murder was done after the party, she could have had an excellent opportunity as regards time."

"Her statement, if I remember rightly, was that she spent the evening with a friend, and didn't get home till late—well after nine I think she says. Well, the M.O. puts the latest time of probable death as nine. Now, this friend, Mrs. Linda Burgess, whom I saw this afternoon, can't be pinned down to the time Mrs. Waring left her. She says that they were gossiping and she wasn't watching the clock. She thought it was after half past eight, but she won't go closer than that."

"Then," said Austen, "we shall have to see if anyone saw Mrs. Waring's car—or Ridgeway's—in the neighbourhood around that time. And that's not particularly likely, you know. If either of them were proposing to dish out a cup of cold poison, they're hardly likely to have cruised

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around the village and parked in front of the house anywhere round the cogent time, are they? Still, we can try."

"The next thing is the provenance of the poison. Any of those people who were at Waring's party, as well as his wife or Ridgeway, had equal opportunity of doing the job, and not a single person I've met, so far, except the Compton girl, seems to have been brimming over with loving kindness towards Waring."

Austen stopped speaking and was very thoughtful for a few seconds.

Then he said: "I feel that there's more in this than meets the eye, you know. Mrs. Waring doesn't strike me as the type who'd take to murder easily. I wouldn't say that she was an impulsive woman, for one thing, and therefore unlikely to kill on an impulse. Moreover, she writes detective novels and therefore has a good idea of what I can only call the mechanics of murder. She's in the habit of working out how people set about the job and how the police find them out. Therefore, if she decided to kill, you'd expect her to have planned the thing very carefully. Don't you think she'd have gone all out to make it look like suicide? She could have done, too, quite easily—but that's exactly what she didn't do. She emphatically denies that her husband was a suicidal type."

"Couldn't that just be extra cleverness?" Flyte asked.

"It could, of course, but she'd know, I think, that that would be one of the things we'd look out for. If she were trying to be clever, I think she'd do better than that.

"On the other hand, as I said before, she was keeping something back when I interviewed her. She never mentioned the prospective divorce; never even hinted at it.

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She might think that we would think it a motive for murder and keep quiet about it for that reason."

"But if she's as clever as you think," Curtis objected, "She'd surely argue that we should be bound to find out about it."

"I agree. I don't quite know what it is, or why, but I have a definite feeling that divorce isn't the motive behind this murder, though on the face of it, it looks as though it could be."

"It makes a good motive, and she—or Ridgeway—makes a good suspect," Flyte suggested.

"Again I agree," Austen said, smiling, "So we obviously concentrate on those two for the present. It's a starting point, any way. Assuming that one of them killed Waring because he was going to fight a divorce, which they badly wanted, and which they didn't think they'd enough evidence to be sure of winning, that provides a motive."

"Their opportunity looks all right: in other words, they can't, apparently, prove that they couldn't have been at the house after the party ended and before Waring died. The thing to prove is that either of them had access to the poison—then, of course, the case immediately becomes stronger."

He broke off, sighed and began to tap his pipe out into an ash tray.

"Well," he said reflectively. "I think that's all we can usefully do this evening. Let's call it a day and—"

A knock on the door interrupted him and a waiter came into the room.

"There's a gentleman downstairs asking if you could spare him a few minutes, Sir. A Mr. Stewart."

CHAPTER SEVEN

AUSTEN went reluctantly downstairs to the lounge, where Ian Stewart was waiting for him.

He was a handsome man, in an elderly, leonine way, with a mass of grey hair and a neat Imperial. Austen found his face intensely interesting, determined, yet kindly, with eyes and mouth very like his daughter's.

"I'm extremely sorry to interrupt your evening," Stewart said, as they shook hands. "But I have an urgent question to ask you."

"I should have come to see you, tomorrow, anyway," Austen told him. "So we can get it over now; instead. What's your urgent query?"

"My wife feels that our daughter ought to be at home with us. I've come to ask you if it will be in order for us to take her back with us tonight."

"What has Mrs. Waring to say about it?"

"She says she doesn't think you'll let her go."

"Does she *want* to, Mr. Stewart?"

The older man looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, to tell you the truth, I think she would rather stay where she is, but my wife feels very strongly that her place is with us, and she won't accept Juliet's excuses."

Austen laughed. "In that case, I'll say that she can't go."

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I should, in any case, prefer that she should stay here. She is, so to speak, the key point of my enquiry."

Stewart looked at him keenly. "Does that mean that you suspect her of having something to do with Waring's death?" His voice was rather agitated.

"Why do you ask that? Do you suspect it, yourself?"

"Of course not!" The old man was indignant. "The idea is too absurd, but Juliet suggested it herself. She said that when a husband is murdered, the wife is always the first to be suspected."

That made Austen chuckle. "Well, theoretically, there's a certain amount of truth in that, Mr. Stewart."

"But you *couldn't* suspect her, Mr. Austen."

"Believe me, I can suspect anybody. I do, actually, regard everyone involved in a murder case as a potential suspect, but that doesn't mean necessarily, that I have any definite suspicions. I expect your daughter knows that."

"But she *couldn't*—"

Austen interrupted. "That's a matter I'm not prepared to discuss at the moment. All I'll say is that everyone connected with this business has to be investigated and the innocent ones will get eliminated.

"Now, let me ask you a question. Will you give me your frank opinion, without reservations, of your son-in-law?"

Stewart nodded. "So far as I can. He was an extremely able man and, academically, he will be a great loss."

"And personally?"

He hesitated for a second. "In my opinion—and perhaps only in mine—he is no loss at all."

"Well, that's frank. You disliked him, then?"

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"As a man, very much indeed—but I'm biased, of course."

"Will you explain?"

"If you will tell me the object of these questions."

"Certainly I will. Mr. Stewart, the character of a murdered man often leads one to his murderer, and I want every pointer I can get."

"I see. Well, you can have my opinion, for what it's worth. I never thought that Waring was the right husband for my daughter. In spite of his accomplishments, which were many, and his charm, which was great, I never felt that he was entirely genuine. He was fundamentally selfish, to put it very temperately, and I didn't feel that he would make a good husband."

"And did he?"

Old Stewart shrugged his shoulders. "At first. At least he made Juliet happy. He was very much in love with her."

"And latterly?"

"He showed himself in his true colours."

"In what way?"

"He began to exploit Juliet. That is my opinion, at any rate. He expected her to supply him with money and she had to work too hard in order to do so. He under-valued her work and let her know it. I considered him a parasite and I resented it on my daughter's behalf."

"Did she resent it, too?"

Stewart shook his head. "No—unfortunately, I think. She took herself at his valuation."

"Did other people share your opinion of Waring?" Austen wanted to know.

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"I have no idea. Naturally, I could not discuss my daughter's husband with outsiders." *

"I see that. Now, had you anything else against Waring?"

Stewart was silent.

"You don't want to answer that question?"

"I would rather not."

"Then, I put it to you that Waring was unfaithful to his wife and you resented it on her behalf."

There was a long pause and then the old man said, reluctantly: "Seeing that you evidently know the truth, Mr. Austen, it would be useless for me to deny it."

"What was Mrs. Waring's reaction to his unfaithfulness?"

"She didn't know about it until just recently. When she learnt the truth, she was heartbroken."

"She decided to divorce him I believe?"

"Reluctantly, Mr. Austen, very reluctantly. She believed that she had failed him, that she wasn't the right wife for him, and she decided to set him free to marry someone who might make him happier. Those were her words to me."

"And she had some woman in mind? In other words, who was to be the co-respondent?"

"I have no idea. There were many women in his life, I understand."

"Was Waring willing to be divorced?"

"That again I cannot say."

"When did Mrs. Waring tell you that she was thinking of divorce?"

"On Saturday."

"This last Saturday? The day he died?"

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"Yes."

"One last question, Mr. Stewart," Austen said, then. "Do you know of anyone who disliked Waring enough to kill him, or anyone who would benefit by his death?"

"Emphatically no."

There seemed no more to be got from that source, for the moment, and Austen let the old man go.

* * * * *

For once, that excellent rule about not working at night and thus getting an untroubled sleep and waking fresh in the morning, was defeated, for when the Yard men had dined, Austen suddenly decided that there was a piece of information that he wanted from Juliet. He could, of course, have sent Curtis or Flyte to get it, but he felt that it wouldn't be fair to break up their chance of a quiet evening because he hadn't thought of his query sooner.

Accordingly, he strolled along to the Waring's house through the quiet village, enjoying the peace of the Spring night and the clear, bestarred sky.

It was chilly outside and the house felt warm and welcoming. He found Juliet in her drawing-room with ~~another~~ woman, a plump, vivacious blonde, and learnt when he was introduced to her, that she was Linda Burnett, obviously a close friend of Juliet's.

"Forgive me for disturbing you, Mrs. Waring," he begged. "I won't keep you a minute, I just wanted to ask you about your husband's relatives. Has he any close ones?"

She told him that Jocelyn's parents were dead, but that he had a sister who lived in Scotland, and a younger brother in London.

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He collected their addresses and was about to go, when Linda spoke to him.

"Mr. Austen, I heard about Jocelyn's death from your Inspector, late this afternoon, and I rushed over at once to collect Juliet and take her home with me, but she says you won't let her leave the house. That's wrong, isn't it? There can't be an earthly reason why she shouldn't."

"Linda, you're an angel," Juliet broke in. "But I've told you that even if Mr. Austen agreed, I'd rather stay here. You won't be offended I know, but truly and honestly I'd rather be by myself. I've got Alice, you know, so I shan't be cut off."

"Darling!" Linda cried, "I suppose you'll have to have your own way, but I do feel that you oughtn't to be alone."

Juliet said, quietly: "That's just what my mother said, and, you know I couldn't come to you, even if Mr. Austen would agree, because she'd be so upset if I stayed with you and not with her. No, my dear, I'm better at home, I've more chance of sleeping, in my own bed, in my own room, and I shan't disturb anyone else if I'm restless."

Linda turned impulsively to Austen. "Why won't you ~~let her~~ go away?" she demanded.

Juliet broke in before he could answer and said, with a rather rueful smile: "Don't you realise that I'm a suspect, Linda?"

"What! What on earth d'you mean? Suspect? What are you driving at, my sweet?"

"The wife is always suspected when a husband is murdered. Isn't that so, Mr. Austen?"

He laughed, quietly. "That's a theory."

"But I never heard anything so absurd in my life," Linda

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protested. "Sometimes, perhaps, but who *could* suspect Juliet? You've only got to look at her! Does she *look* like a murderess?"

Again Austen laughed. "No, she doesn't, I agree with you, but one doesn't go too much by appearances in my job."

"Yes, but it's too utterly fantastic," Linda pursued. "Surely you can see that for yourself. Juliet's not the type at all. She's the kindest, mildest creature on earth—"

Austen then delivered his much-used speech about everyone being under suspicion, officially, though not necessarily a suspect, and Linda accepted it as implying that he didn't in the least really doubt Juliet's innocence.

Then she got up, saying: "Well, I shall really have to go now, if you're certain I can't persuade you to come too, Juliet. That wretched car of ours broke down last night, miles from anywhere, and Dick couldn't get it going again for hours, and we didn't get home until about two this morning, so I shall have to get a bus. I only hope I haven't missed it already."

Austen said, quickly: "May I drive you home, Mrs. Burnett?"

She turned to him, beaming: "Oh, you are an angel! If you would, it would be heaven! I do so loathe buses; they're always cold and uncomfortable and we live positively miles from the bus stop and you'll save me a hideous walk."

"Well, my car's at the Bear. I'll go and get it and bring it round."

"Oh! Don't bother to do that, Mr. Austen. I can just manage to stagger those few yards. Just wait a second while I go and get my coat and I'll be with you."

She and Juliet disappeared together and when they came

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back, Linda was wrapped in furs, her pretty face looking like a kitten's peering out from a huge collar.

When they reached the Bear, Austen invited her to come in and have a drink. There were quite a number of questions which he thought he might profitably ask her. She was evidently a very intimate friend of Juliet's and an impulsive, uninhibited woman into the bargain, and there might be something interesting to be learnt from her.

She thought that a drink would be most acceptable.

"I got an awful shock when I heard of Jocelyn's death," she confided, as they made their way to the bar. "It was only on Saturday that he rang me up and asked my husband and me to a party. It doesn't seem possible that he should be dead! Murdered too! I simply can't believe it. It's knocked poor Juliet endways."

"She's being very plucky," Austen commented, as he ordered their drinks.

"She's like that," said Linda. "Never shows her feelings. I've known her since we were children and she's always been like that. She's too self-controlled, in my opinion. It would do her good to have a good cry, like other women, but no, she'll never let herself go. Consequently, she's in the most frightful state now, and you can't be surprised. Her husband's not only dead but murdered and she's apparently under suspicion, or something fantastic."

"Suppose we go and sit at that table by the fire," Austen suggested. "Or would you rather stand?"

"Oh no! Let's sit," she agreed, as he hoped she would. He thought she'd be more inclined to be communicative

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sitting than standing. Besides, the bar was rather a public spot for some of the things he wanted to discuss.

He carried their drinks across and lit cigarettes for them both. "Was Mrs. Waring particularly devoted to her husband?" he asked, when they were settled.

"Simply besotted," Linda told him. "At least, when they were first married."

"You mean that it didn't last?"

Linda smiled. "Well, they settled down, you know. One does. The first fine careless rapture goes."

"And hers did?"

"Yes—no. She went on thinking he was wonderful, but well—perhaps not *so* wonderful."

"The guilt started to wear, in fact?"

"A bit, not badly, but I think she got glimpses of what was underneath, from time to time. But don't get the wrong impression, Mr. Austen. She was a devoted wife. She built her life around him—she simply hadn't one of her own except where he was concerned and she's feeling lost now, as well as unhappy. That's why she's so fearfully cut up—and, of course, because they quarrelled the last time she saw him, and she says she said some beastly things, and now, of course, they can never be taken back."

That put him on the alert but he didn't show it.

"Yes, that would make her self-reproachful, I expect, in the circumstances. Any idea what they quarrelled about?"

He could see her stiffen, as though she had become suddenly aware that she'd said too much.

"Married people do quarrel from time to time, you know," she told him, in a would-be, casual voice. "Often it's about practically nothing, but you get worked up and

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you dig up old grievances and say far more than you meant to and you feel as if the world had come to an end—and then it all blows over and you wonder what it was all about.”

“Do you think that this was one of those quarrels?” he asked. “Or was it about their divorce, perhaps?”

Linda gave a big sigh of relief. “Oh! So you know about that, do you? So I needn’t be careful and diplomatic any more. Juliet told me to keep quiet about it. She said that there was no need to publish it abroad, now—*de mortuis* stuff, you know.”

“Do you happen to know who the co-respondent would have been?”

“I haven’t a clue. There’d be plenty to choose from.”

“Like that, was it? But surely, there must have been some particular one?”

She laughed. “Well, as a matter of fact there was, only a few months ago, and we all enjoyed it quite a lot—except Juliet and she didn’t know anything about it, poor lamb.”

“Tell me,” he invited, with the air of one settling down for a good gossip.

~~“Well,~~ it was a case of the biter bit and you couldn’t help enjoying it, if you weren’t particularly fond of Jocelyn—and no one who cared about Juliet was.

“He’d been so used to being all conquering and then this woman came along—a Don’s wife and definitely something—the enigmatic type, great big eyes and a Mona Lisa smile—and she played hard to get and Jocelyn fell for it. He made quite an exhibition of himself, for a time, running round after her like Mary’s little lamb, and then, presumably, he got her and promptly cooled off. Then it

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was her turn to do the running. It was really very funny—in its rather unpleasant way.”

“And what was the name of this charmer?”

“Do you think I ought to tell you?” Linda asked hesitantly.

“Yes, I do. You see, Mrs. Burnett, I’m looking for someone who had a reason to hate Waring.”

“Ooh! Enough to kill him, you mean, and then you wouldn’t go round suspecting Juliet? In that case—her name’s Lucille Trentham.”

He chose that moment to offer her another drink and go to the bar to get it. When he came back, he changed the subject.

“You’re helping me a lot,” he told her. “Be kind and continue the good work.”

“Waring gave a party on Saturday evening, to which, I’m told, he deliberately asked people who disliked him and one another and then stirred up trouble of malice aforethought.”

“That explains why he asked my husband and me!” she interrupted.

“And you didn’t go. Just as well, perhaps. Anyway, Mrs. Burnett, there was a good deal of ill-feeling at that party, and anyone there who had a motive for murdering him, had an opportunity to do so.”

“Now, I’ve got a list—incomplete, I’m afraid—of the people who were there. Several were only called by their Christian names. I want you to see if you can identify any of them for me and then tell me if you think any of them had a particular enmity towards Waring.”

He took the list out of his wallet and handed it to her.

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Varied feelings crossed her face as she read it—surprise, satisfaction and even pleasure.

Presently she looked up.

"There are several I know," she said. "Lucille's there—that's the woman I was telling you about. I'd say she hated him pretty venomously. Then Cecily Compton—I've heard her name, but she's only a child and she probably had a hero worship for him—he took girls that way. Dr. Hentshell I've met a few times and I shouldn't think he's capable of any emotion outside his work. Margot and Dolores sound like two of Jocelyn's ex's, but I don't know their surnames and I wouldn't expect them to bear a grudge. Percival and Aubrey Roberts. There you have something—not Percival—he's just a pretty boy—but Roberts. He *loathed* Jocelyn. He's a nasty, spiteful little man—a pansy—and he hated Jocelyn with all his mean malicious little soul."

"That's a strong statement."

"But it's true. Actually, I don't blame the creature, though I've simply no use for him, but Jocelyn did behave abominably to him and he resented it in a great big way."

"Well, you'd better tell me about it," Austen invited.

"It's not a nice story, but Jocelyn wasn't a nice man in some ways. He was a sadist and he simply adored making people look silly and that's one of the things the pansy type can't take.

"Anyway, the Roberts is a social climber and a snob. He thought it would add to his kudos if he got to know the Warrings. He ran round after Jocelyn, who encouraged him and then proceeded to imitate his mannerisms in public. Still the creature persisted and then, one evening, Jocelyn

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asked him to a men's dinner he was giving at some restaurant, and he publicly and deliberately insulted him. It was done loudly and in front of lots of people and caused a good deal of laughter.

"Roberts has never forgiven him. He's never lost an opportunity to say something horrible about Jocelyn—never to his face, of course, but spreading malicious bits of gossip round behind his back. He still came running, though, when Jocelyn beckoned."

When, later on, he deposited Linda Burnett at her own house, he felt that his evening had been rewarding. If he'd had to give up the quiet contemplation to which he had looked forward, he had exchanged something very well worth while for it.

He spent a restful night, in spite of his busy mind, and woke to one of those mornings which the English climate produces from time to time, to show what it can really do when it tries.

There was a haze of pink on the larches and the beeches as they burgeoned in the sun. The sky was a deep cloudless blue and the air smelled of flowers. He wished that he could find that one of the people he had to interview that morning lived deep into the country, so that he might drive between the greening hedges and see primroses on the banks and hear the larks sing. Instead, he feared that he would have to go to Oxford, where he wouldn't be able to see the trees for the spires.

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Last night's findings necessitated some change in his previous plans, and when he had breakfasted, he had a short conference with Curtis and Flyte, to put them abreast of the latest developments.

"The time has come," he said, "to hunt down the source of the barbitone—not a simple job, I'm afraid. You'd better co-opt the local branch, I think. I'm going to spend my day on interviews."

* * * * *

His first one was with Juliet Waring, and she seemed surprised to see him again so soon

She looked much better, more rested and less fine drawn. She told him, when he asked, that she had slept quite well.

When the polite preliminaries were over, he went straight to the point.

"Mrs. Waring," he asked. "Why did you try to hide from me that you were intending to divorce your husband?"

"I didn't see that it concerned you," she answered, almost sharply. "It could have no bearing on my husband's death, which is what you are enquiring into."

"That's for me to judge. But why try to hide the fact?"

She flushed. "Mr. Austen, do you think I wanted to advertise it, now he's dead? I hoped that no one would know, except the one or two people I'd told before he died. It isn't a thing a woman is proud of—that her husband hasn't been faithful to her, you know. One is—ashamed."

That, of course, was a perfectly plausible reason; and he wasn't ready to argue it, at the moment, so he went on to his next topic.

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"When you came home on Saturday night you washed up all the glasses that you found. What made you do that?"

"Instinct, I suppose. They looked sordid and horrible and I couldn't bear the thought of finding them all dirty in the morning."

He said: "If I suspected you of murdering your husband, Mrs. Waring, I might find your action rather significant."

The blood drained from her face.

"If I *had* murdered him," she reposted, quickly, "I should know that, and it would be the last thing I should have done."

"Are you sure? If you were working such a thing out for a book, how would you have arranged it?"

"As a guilty person, trying to cover up what he'd done? I don't know. I've never thought it out. I should think I'd simply wash the glass that the poison had been in and put it away and leave the others to be found."

"What about fingerprints on the one you washed?"

"Oh!" she said. "I hadn't thought of that. It wouldn't do to wipe them all off, would it? Then, if I remembered that, I should make sure that I fingered a number of the clean ones in the cupboard. It would be natural for me to leave prints if I'd washed and dried them."

"It would be simpler and cleverer, I think, to wash and dry them all—as you did."

"But not because I killed him!" she cried. "You can't believe that!"

"I don't want to," he said, quickly. "But it is impossible not to see that you might have done it. You had a motive—more than one, perhaps. Your husband had been un-

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faithful to you ; he was going to make it difficult for you to divorce him ; you may have wanted to marry someone else ; you loathed the idea of all the publicity a divorce would entail. If he were dead, all those things would be simplified.

"You had an opportunity, too. Who is to say that you didn't arrive back in this house after all the guests had gone and give your husband that lethal dose?"

She almost shrank away from him for a second, and then, very slowly and very painfully, she said : " Yes. I can see that you can make a case against me, but it isn't true. I swear to you that it isn't true."

He left that subject without further comment, then, and handed her his list of names to be identified.

"Those are the people who were at your husband's party on Saturday," he told her, "so far as I know at present. Some of them, as you see, have only Christian names. I want you to tell me which of them you know and all that you can about them."

She read the paper slowly, and then looked up at him.

"I can't tell you much," she said. "These people without surnames mean nothing to me, except Dolores. She's a would-be artistic woman, I believe. I've never met her, but I've heard her talked about."

"In what way?"

She smiled, faintly. "Not pleasantly, I'm afraid ; as rather bogus and noisy and rather a nuisance, generally."

"Did you know that she was a friend of your husband's?"

"An acquaintance, I should imagine. He hadn't much use for that type."

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"Why should he ask her to his party, then?"

"I simply can't imagine—and that applies to several of these others."

"For instance?"

"Aubrey Roberts and his friend Percival. They're not pleasant types and Jocelyn despised them and used to imitate them and make fun of them."

"Yes, I'd heard that. Well, go on."

She glanced at the list again. "There's Dr. Hentshell. I know him quite well and like him and he certainly doesn't seem to fit in with these others."

"Did your husband like him?"

She hesitated. "Well—not *like*, I think. They were colleagues and he admired his work, but to tell you the truth, I've always had a feeling that Jocelyn was a bit jealous of him—as a scholar, of course."

"But there was no open enmity?"

"Of course not, and if my idea is right, it was only a sort of professional jealousy, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I understand. Next, please?"

"Cecily Compton I've met once. Quite a nice little girl; one of my husband's students. That's all I know about her."

"Mrs. Trentham, I've met a number of times. She's a very spectacular person and Jocelyn admired her looks. I don't know anything else about her. The rest of this list means nothing to me at all."

He thought for a moment and then he asked: "Would you be surprised if any of these people had feelings of actual hatred towards Professor Waring or anything to gain by his death?"

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She laughed, quietly. "Surprised would be a mild word. It's quite impossible—except—" She broke off.

"Except?"

"Well, the Roberts creature must have disliked him pretty heartily, I should think. Jocelyn was quite brutal to him sometimes and he must have resented it, only possibly he admired him so much—which he certainly appeared to—that he forgave him.

"Only—well, have you met him?"

"Once."

"Then can you imagine his *killing* anyone, because that's what you're getting at, isn't it? Poor little Roberts. I can't stand him, but I would have thought he's the most harmless creature that ever existed. Someone might want to kill *him*, perhaps, because he has the most venomous tongue, but I don't believe that anyone would think he was worth the trouble!"

"That's really all you can tell me about these people, then, Mrs. Waring?"

"Absolutely, I'm afraid. I'm sorry I can't help you more, but, you see, my husband did lead two distinct lives, one here and one in Oxford, and the two didn't often come together, as it were, and he had lots of acquaintances I knew nothing about."

"Then I've only one more question to ask you, at the moment. When you were contemplating divorce, whom were you going to cite as co-respondent?"

She caught her breath sharply, but when she answered, her voice was calm enough.

"I frankly don't know. Do we have to talk about it? It's a subject I hate, as I've already told you."

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"Yes, but I must have your answer."

She steadied herself. "Very well then. I believe that my husband had *affaires* with several women—he practically admitted it to me, but told me no names. I was going to leave it to my lawyers to find out about them."

"And then?"

"I should have chosen the one who had least to lose by the publicity of a divorce."

He left her after that, for, at the moment, he didn't feel that he could profitably press her further.

CHAPTER EIGHT

OXFORD was his next port of call, a tree-lined, suburban road where Lucille Trentham lived.

She opened the door to him, herself, a tall, spectacular looking woman, in a green corduroy house-coat. Her hair was a deep Titian red, and her eyes were almost green. She was probably in her early thirties, but her face was haggard this morning, and she looked older.

Austen said: "Mrs. Trentham. I have come to ask you a few questions about Professor Waring. Did you know that he was dead?"

Her deep, throaty voice said: "Yes. I saw it in the paper this morning. Why do you want to see me?"

"You were at a party he gave on Saturday. You must be one of the last people to see him alive and you may be able to help me in my investigations."

"Come in, then," she invited, nervously. "We can't stand out here talking."

She took him into a room which had obviously been decorated to set off her colouring, and offered him a chair by the fire.

The room wasn't very tidy and it obviously hadn't been dusted that morning. The day's paper lay, disintegrated, on the floor.

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She sat down herself choosing a chair with its back to the window. He rather thought that she did that deliberately, and she was obviously nervous, for she kept pulling at her handkerchief with fingers that weren't quite steady.

"I don't see how I can help you," she said, defensively. "Professor Waring asked me to a party and I went. I had a few drinks and came away. That's all."

"I want to know about the other people who were there. You can tell me about them."

Instantly she looked relieved.

"They were all strangers to me," she said, quickly.

"Without exception?"

"Well, I mean, I didn't know them personally. I recognized Dr. Hentshell—you can't live in Oxford without knowing some people by sight, even if you've never spoken to them; and there were a couple of women who are a good deal talked about—I didn't feel that I ought to have been asked there with them—but I don't even know their names."

"And that's all?"

"Absolutely."

"Now, I'll tell you something, Mrs. Trentham. It's quite possible that Professor Waring was murdered by one of the people at that party. What is more, he announced, previously, that all the people he asked to it hated either him or one another. So, if you didn't know anyone there, you couldn't have hated them, and the inference is that you hated him—and he knew it. What have you to say to that?"

She was obviously startled. "I—I don't know what you mean."

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"I think you do." He glanced quickly at her and judged that she had got to the state where he could take a chance on scaring her into a little truth-telling. He would try a big bluff, and he didn't think that she had sufficient strength of character to resist it. He had dealt with these provincial Delilahs before.

He looked her sternly in the face and she couldn't meet his eyes. Her hands moved more restlessly and her lips were trembling.

"Now, I'll tell you why you hated him," he said. "You had an *affaire* with him and he cooled off first—don't bother to deny it. I know it's true—and you couldn't have felt flattered about that, could you?"

"Then, on Saturday, he rang you up and told you something which scared you out of your wits. He said that his wife was going to divorce him and you would be the co-respondent. He suggested that you should come and see him and talk it over and try to find some way out of it. Am I right?"

"Oh God!" she cried. "How could you know?"

That's a bit of luck, he told himself. That came off nicely. Aloud, he said: "Now you tell me what happened when you got to the Warings' house."

She couldn't speak for a moment or so. She had begun to cry, noisily and untidily, rocking to and fro in abandonment, and moaning: "What shall I do? O God! What shall I do?"

Presently she spoke to him, between her sobs. "Couldn't you forget about it? Couldn't you keep it quiet? If anyone knows about it I'll kill myself, I swear I will. I couldn't bear it if my husband knew."

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"Shouldn't you have thought of that, before? Listen, Mrs. Trentham, your best plan is to tell me everything, and, if I can, I'll not let this divorce business be known."

Gradually her sobs subsided and she told him her wretched little tale.

She had got herself involved with Jocelyn, she said, but her husband had known nothing about it. He wasn't an observant man, he was engrossed in his work and was used to her finding her own amusements. But when Jocelyn had told her that she was going to be cited in a divorce case, she was desperate. That wasn't a thing which her husband could be kept ignorant of, and he would divorce her and she would be thrown on the world without money or background or any means to earn the kind of living she liked. Austen summed that part up as: "I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed."

Normally, she would have refused to see Waring, for their parting had been final and she was now thoroughly out of love with him, but this new development sent her hurrying to Woodstock, ready to do anything which would save her from publicity and scandal.

To her mortification, she found, when she reached the house, that Jocelyn wasn't alone, but surrounded by people whom she didn't know.

She had a miserable time, for the party was what she described as a thoroughly beastly one, with everyone hating everyone else and Jocelyn enjoying that, maliciously, and making barbed remarks with double meanings especially to her.

But she couldn't go. She had to speak to him alone, and

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that meant that she was forced to stay until everyone else had left.

Then at last, they were alone together, and she thought her time had come, but Jocelyn refused to talk to her. He said he felt too ill.

"Did he look ill?" Austen wanted to know.

"Simply ghastly. I thought he had drunk too much. He said he had. He said: 'For God's sake, Lucille, get out. I've had too much to drink and I feel awful'."

"Was he normally a heavy drinker?"

She shook her head. "He liked his drinks, but he very rarely had much. Just sometimes, at a party, he'd let himself go, but he had a head like iron and never seemed to feel it."

"So you were surprised when he said he felt ill?"

"I was, a bit. It wasn't like him and I should have thought he was putting it on, just to be hateful to me, only he looked so bad."

She had begged him to let her stay until he felt better, but he refused, and practically pushed her out of the house in the end.

"What time was that?" Austen asked.

"About eight—perhaps a minute or two after. I know by the time my bus went."

He thought for a second, wondering just how far he should go with her at the moment.

Then he said: "Do you realize that you were probably the last person to see Waring alive?"

"Except his murderer," she put in, quickly, thinking that she was being clever.

"Not necessarily. Someone could have given him poison

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during the party, and when he felt ill, it was because it was taking effect."

"Oh God! How awful!" she exclaimed. "So he might have been dying when I left him."

"Yes. He might. Now, tell me this: during that party, could anyone have had a chance to put something in one of Waring's drinks?"

"Why, yes. Easily." She was feeling better now that her story was told. Her voice was steadier and her hands less restless and she appeared to be considering Austen's question carefully.

"You see," she explained, "the drinks were all on a table at one end of the room, and Jocelyn told everyone to help themselves—he said he couldn't be bothered to bottle—and so there were always people round the table, and every now and then Jocelyn would call out: 'Someone get me another drink', so you see, there were plenty of chances. But *who* would do such a thing?"

"Why not you?" Austen asked quietly.

She actually screamed. "No! No! I didn't! I swear I didn't! Why should I?"

"That's easy to answer. You must have known, in your heart of hearts, that if Mrs. Waring were going to bring you into her divorce case, nothing that you or Waring could do would keep you out. If he were dead, there wouldn't *be* a divorce case, would there? So, if you'd thought that out beforehand, what would be easier than for you to bring along a fatal dose of something and slip it in one of his drinks? You've already explained how simple that would be."

For a moment she was speechless, then she burst into

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tears again, protesting her innocence, incoherently, through her sobs.

When the storm had somewhat subsided, Austen put a question which sounded quite without sense to Lucille. He asked :

“Do you normally sleep well, Mrs. Trentham?”

She removed the handkerchief from her face in surprise.

“Why, yes, as a rule.”

“Have you ever had to take anything for insomnia?”

“Well, once I did. I fell and broke two ribs and the pain was devastating and I couldn’t sleep at all. The doctor gave me some stuff which helped.”

He got the name of her doctor and, after a few more questions and one or two warnings, he went away, leaving behind a woman, frightened and bewildered as she had never been in her life before, terrified by her encounter with a man, on whom, she felt instinctively, neither her beauty nor her wiles, would have the least effect.

This case, Austen felt, was now beginning to take some shape. He was no longer casting bows at ventures, and one or two lines of enquiry were now indicated, to the exclusion of less promising ones.

He was beginning to feel particularly interested in Cecily Compton. He had a feeling that she had more to do with the matter than had hitherto appeared.

Her first impact had been as a young girl infatuated with Jocelyn Waring, who had been inadvertently drawn

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into what had proved to be a Poison Party, which she hadn't enjoyed and which she had left early.

Now he was beginning to wonder. There was such a thing as appearing too innocent, too non-involved.

He didn't think—though he was prepared to change his mind—that she had anything active to do with the killing of Jocelyn Waring, but he was certain that she was mixed up with it somewhere. She was, he was sure, one of the pieces in the jigsaw, and would presently fit into her proper place and help to make up the complete picture which would eventually emerge.

He considered the case for and against her.

Motive, if Roberts' story of Waring's last words to her were true, she might have. What he was reported to have said implied that she had had a considerable *affaire* with him, not just a young-girlish infatuation, and, assuming that were so, it could have driven any woman to fury.

She had the opportunity to poison him. It would have been as easy for her to do so as for anyone else at that curious party.

But, according to Roberts, that brutal remark had been made just as she was going, which would mean that her anger would not have been roused until it was too late to act on it.

On the other hand, on her own admission, she had made up her quarrel—whatever it was about—with Waring on the telephone, before she left home in the morning. She had been in his company all day and neither she, nor anyone else, was likely to have carried barbitone around with her—assuming that she had any—all day on the off chance of wanting to poison him. It is a soporific, after all, and

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the place for it is in the medicine cupboard or on the bedside table at home.

All the same, she would have to explain quite a lot of things.

If Roberts were to be trusted—and that was doubtful, of course—she had lied about what Waring had said to her when they parted on Saturday night. She was hiding things, of course, which was to some extent understandable, because no woman, unless she is particularly brazen or has some axe to grind, is going to admit, willingly, that she has had an *affaire* with a married man—particularly not a young girl.

That, again, cut another way.

Supposing that, in the course of ^utheir day together, Waring had told her that his wife was going to divorce him and that she would be the correspondent? She might have argued—as so, of course might Lucille Trentham—that, if Waring were dead, there would be no divorce and therefore she could keep her secret.

If, in that case—and it was a big if—she could have got hold of the poison, there would be a very strong case against her.

He decided to see her that afternoon and force her into telling the truth and the whole truth. With the information he now had, on which to base his questioning, he didn't think it would be too difficult.

Then there was the case against the unpleasing Aubrey Roberts.

Usually, Austen had no wholesale condemnation for

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people of that type. Often enough they couldn't help being what they were, and some of them made considerable and successful efforts not to obtrude, their divagation from the normal.

Others, and Roberts appeared to be one of these, made almost a parade of it, and for those he had no use at all.

Creatures of that type were nearly all malicious, he considered, in more or less degree, but they were usually ineffectual and confined their spite to their tongues.

But they were apt to be irresponsible, too, and unable to see beyond their immediate loves or hates—particularly hates. If sufficiently goaded, their spite could become lethal—not words but deeds.

Moreover their methods of revenge were seldom violent, they preferred the more subtle ways of killing.

Now Roberts, according to Linda Burnett, had a grudge and a very bitter one, against Waring. Might he not have been waiting his opportunity of paying off his score in the most final way of all?

He had, on the face of it, motive enough, opportunity certainly—and perhaps access to means as well.

He could, in that case, have gone to the party, armed with the ingredients of the poisoned chalice. Waring could have so goaded him in the morning that he had decided to come back in the evening and get rid of his tormentor once and for all.

, * * * * *

The whole question now, or a very great part of it, hung on this business of access to the means. He hoped that

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Curtis and Flyte had been able to put in a useful and productive morning's work on that subject.

He met his colleagues, as arranged, in the local police station.

With his mind full of his previous cogitations, his first question was: "Any luck?"

Curtis laughed, "Yes and no, and anyway, you won't like it."

Austen raised his eyebrows in a query.

Flyte put in: "It's the most extraordinary thing, Sir, but all these local M.O.'s seem to feed their patients on the barbiturates."

"Do they now? Expound, please."

"We've only coped with part of the job, of course, but the locals were very helpful. They'd started on it yesterday, as you asked, and their mills grind slowly—"

"But exceedingly small? Well, let's have it."

Curtis said: "Right. We start with a plain statement that no one connected with this case who has so far been identified, has been supplied with the stuff by any chemist here or in Oxford, within the last two months.

"Before that, quite a number of people had prescriptions for it made up. This is what we've unearthed."

"Mrs. Waring has never bought any. Professor Waring, yes."

Austen whistled softly.

Curtis nodded. "Yes, I thought that would surprise you. He went to a doctor in Oxford, about three months ago,

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and said he wasn't sleeping and this man gave him a prescription.

"He says that he was a bit chary of doing it, at first, because Waring wasn't one of his regular patients. Waring explained that he didn't want to go to his local N.H. man—Ferris—because he was his wife's doctor too, and he didn't want it to get round to her that he wasn't well. He asked for a tonic, too, and got it.

"The Oxford man only prescribed just enough of the barbitone for a couple of nights' sleep, but the whole wouldn't have been a lethal dose."

"That's most interesting," Austen commented. "I wonder if it leads anywhere. However, we can deal with that later. Go on."

"Cecily Compton, next. She's never had any herself, but her mother, a very nervy type, I gather, had a course of it, so to speak, prescribed by Ferris. She is supposed to have left off taking it several months ago. Prescription not renewed.

"Aubrey Roberts was in a car smash around Christmas, complained of insomnia, and was ordered two capsules a night for about a week.

"Dr. Hentshell has never had any locally, nor Mrs. Trentham.

"Ridgeway says that he had what he calls "some sleeping stuff" after a minor operation, six months ago, but he doesn't know what it was and he finished it up and any way, he was in a nursing home at the time and one of the nurses gave him his nightly dollop."

Curtis stopped speaking and Flyte took up the tale.

"I tried to track down these anonymous people, who

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were at the party, Sir—the ones without surnames—but, so far, I've only identified one of them; this chap Percival. He appears to be totally harmless, and only met Waring for the first time that evening.

"He's a boy friend of Roberts, and they both tell the same tale.

"Waring suggested that Roberts should bring a friend along to the party, if he cared to, and knowing that Percival was fearfully keen to meet Waring, he toted him along. He doesn't appear to have the slightest motive for murder, and he has had no supply of barbitone."

Austen said: "All of this is all right so far as it goes, but it doesn't go nearly far enough. Any of these people—except presumably Waring himself who wasn't in possession of a lethal dose—could have hoarded up their supply until they collected enough to kill. One has known that kind of thing happen before now. Any of them could have done as Waring did and gone to a non-local doctor, paid their fee as private patients and collected a prescription. As a matter of fact, I believe, if you're away from home you can go to any doctor you like, and it costs you nothing, but I've never tried."

"Well, where does it all get us?" Curtis wanted to know.

"Into another job of work, I'm afraid. Flyte had better go on hunting down these nameless women, and you, Curtis, had better go and see Mrs. Trentham, Robin Ridgeway, the Stewarts and Dr. Hentshell and pursue the subject of barbiturates. It won't do any good, of course, because if any of them had a supply it will have been disposed of by now, but you might ask them to let you have a look at their medicine cupboards."

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"And the Compton girl and Roberts?" Curtis queried.

"I'll deal with them myself. Leaving out Mrs. Waring, they are the two people in whom I'm most interested, at the moment."

"May I ask why Sir?" Flyte asked.

"Because I find that they both appear to have an adequate motive for murder."

"Do you seriously suspect any of them, Sir?"

Austen looked thoughtful. "Seriously?" he repeated. "Well, theoretically, I suppose I ought to say yes, but actually, the answer is no. Mrs. Waring gives me no impression of guilt. She's hiding something, but I think I know what it is, and I don't think that she has the character to do a premeditated murder."

The Waring's house, that day, was inundated with callers. Alice, after the rush started, came to ask Juliet's permission to send them all away.

"There's two kinds of them, Madam," she reported. "There's ones who are really sorry and want to know how you are, and there's the others who've called out of curiosity—looking for a sensation. If you see one lot, you'll have to see the other, so it would be better for you if you just let me say that you're not well enough to see anybody. You just tell me if there's anyone special you'd like to see, and let me deal with the rest."

Juliet was only too glad to let her do as she wanted. Her only proviso was that her parents, Linda Burnett and Robin Ridgeway were to be allowed to see her if they wanted to

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—"and the police, of course," she added with some bitterness.

After William Austen had gone, Linda arrived. She went after lunch, to be replaced by Robin and Juliet's father simultaneously.

"Where's Mother?" Juliet wanted to know.

"In bed, heavily ~~loped~~ oped," said her father. "She was terribly upset last night, worrying about you and this awful business. I don't think she slept at all and this morning she had a plain, ordinary attack of hysteria—I can't call it anything else—and I had to send for the doctor to give her something to quieten her."

"Oh dear!" Juliet exclaimed. "That's not a bit like her."

"Well, it's not every day that your son-in-law gets murdered, is it?"

"And that your daughter is suspected of having done it!"

"Juliet!" Robin and her father exclaimed together.

"Well, it's true," she ~~reposed~~ replied. "That Superintendent has been here this morning and practically accused me of it."

"Do you mean that seriously?" her father asked.

"Yes, I do."

"But on what grounds?"

She laughed a little bitterly. "I can see his point. I have, according to his rules, behaved suspiciously. First of all, I washed up those glasses and I may have done it to destroy evidence against myself. He's clever. He can twist that perfectly simple action of mine against me in half a dozen ways."

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"That's the first thing, and the second is that I hid from him that I was going to divorce Jocelyn."

"Did he find a suspicious reason for that?" Robin asked.

"Oh yes! The general argument is that if there was going to be a divorce, Jocelyn and I were on bad terms and I might be bearing a fearful grudge because he'd been unfaithful. Also, if the divorce were contested, I might lose my case, so I killed him, to be sure of getting free. Either way, I had a motive, and naturally hid the truth about it so that I shouldn't be suspected."

"Well," said her father, most reasonably, "as he *does* know that there's a divorce pending, I presume you told him why you kept quiet about it?"

"Of course I didn't! My dear father, if I'd said that I wanted to make sure that girl wasn't brought into the limelight, he'd say 'What girl?' Well, wouldn't he?"

"You could have refused to tell him her name."

"And then he wouldn't have believed my story at all. Either that, or he'd have ferreted round and found out."

"How could he?"

"Well,—oh dear! It all gets more and more difficult. You see, she was at that wretched party of Jocelyn's on Saturday. Austen showed me the list and she was on it. That means that she had the opportunity to murder him, and if he knew the whole horrid story about her and Jocelyn, he'd decide that she had a motive too, and then she'd be deeper in the whole business I'm trying to get her out of."

"Not a well constructed sentence," Stewart commented, trying to lighten the atmosphere, which was becoming strained, "but I see your meaning. I think you're carrying

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this gallantry and protection business rather too far.”

“I agree,” Robin put in. “There’s such a thing as self preservation, Juliet.”

“Oh! I know, but there’s such a thing as being innocent, too. I can’t be found guilty if I’m not, and being suspected is horrible, but it can’t do me any real harm in the long run.”

“Robin’s right,” her father said. “You must look after yourself, my child. I’m sure that you ought to do everything you can to free yourself from suspicion.”

“I have a suggestion to make. This man, Austen, from what I’ve seen of him, is an extremely understanding and intelligent man. Tell him the truth and throw yourself, so to speak, on his mercy. Tell him that you’ve been trying to keep this girl out of it, and ask him to do the same.”

“Your father’s right,” Robin agreed. “I think Austen would co-operate—unless the girl’s guilty, of course.”

That startled Juliet. “Guilty! *That* child!”

“Remember, I don’t know who she is, but she *might* be. Would you want to shield her, in that case?”

That was a definite problem and she couldn’t find an immediate answer. All she said was: “No one could be surprised if she *felt* like murdering Jocelyn, after what he’d done to her.”

“That answers nothing,” Juliet’s father said firmly.

Robin said: “There’s nothing to say that Austen doesn’t already know about Jocelyn and the girl. There must have been some gossip about them, I should think.”

“Oh heavens!” Juliet cried. “Everything seems to be getting so muddled.”

“Because you’re not thinking clearly,” her father told

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her. "I don't blame you, child, with all you're going through, but the thing you *are* guilty of is confusing your issues. I suggest that you should see this girl and talk the whole thing over with her. Find out if Austen has talked to her and if so, what he said and what she answered, and then make up your mind whether it's even necessary for you to go on trying to shield her."

"That's right," Robin agreed. "That's good, sound common sense. Get the girl to come along and see you. Ask her straight out if she's innocent or guilty. You ought to be able to tell, by the way she answers, whether she's speaking the truth or not. And then—well, you'll have to make up your mind what you'll do, I suppose."

"There's one thing, though, I'd ask you to remember; In your own books, you're perpetually saying what fools people are who try to deceive the police. I'd suggest that you apply that to yourself, in this case."

"Sooner or later Austen will find out who killed Jocelyn, and the sooner the better for you, and the more you co-operate with him, the sooner he'll eliminate you from his list of suspects."

CHAPTER NINE

SOON after lunch, that afternoon, Austen went off to see Dr. Ferris, with whom he had made an appointment.

"I'm sorry to worry you again," he began, when he had introduced himself. "You were good enough to give some information to my assistants this morning, and it's about that that I've come to see you."

"I haven't anything to add to that," Ferris told him.

Austen smiled, most pleasantly. "It's enlargement I want, not addition."

"In what direction?"

"Well, Doctor, I don't know how much Inspector Curtis explained to you, but we've got the names of most of the people who were at Waring's party on Saturday, and we're seeing if any of them connect up with barbitone."

"Yes, and so?"

"Well, there are one or two of them I could do with knowing a little more about."

"For instance?"

"To start with, there's Mrs. Compton."

"Good heavens!" Ferris exclaimed. "Was *she* at that party? I shouldn't have thought she was Waring's cup of tea."

"No? I haven't met her and *she* wasn't there, as a matter

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of, fact, but she could be a potential local source of the barbitone."

"Well, she wasn't."

"But I understood you'd been prescribing it for her?"

"I had, quite true. I'll explain. She'd got herself into a bad state of nerves and wasn't sleeping—this was some months ago—so I put her on to the stuff, just to get her back into the habit of sleeping. I gave her diminishing doses—she didn't know that, of course, or the psychological effect mightn't have been the same. In the end, she was having capsules of plain water. She then came to me and said that I'd cured her and she was sleeping perfectly, and should she give me back the capsules she had left, because she didn't like having that kind of stuff around the house.

"They wouldn't be much use to me, you can see, so I said, 'put them down the drain', which she assured me she would do. So she's no source of barbitone."

"Obviously, and that means that I must look elsewhere."

"In which direction now?"

"Well, you treated Roberts with the stuff, I understand?"

"Oh *that*," Ferris' voice was sardonic. "Yes, it needed something to soothe its nerves after what it called a motor accident."

"Wasn't there an accident?"

"Certainly not in my sense of the word. A car he was in grazed the wing of another car. No one was really hurt, but Roberts was thrown about a bit when the brakes went on and had a few minor bruises. From the way he talked, you'd have thought he'd been in a major crash. He drama-

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tized the whole thing tremendously, and got an enormous amount of gratification out of it."

"I take it you don't much care for him?"

"I do *not*, Mr. Austen—off the record, of course. I've a lot of sympathy for these maladjusted types, in general, if they make an honest effort to adjust themselves, but these ones who don't, and who exaggerate and encourage their difference from the normal, because they think it adds to their importance, I've no use for, at all."

"Roberts is one of those?"

"I'm sure he is. He's also, like many of his kind, a hypochondriac. He was fussing himself into fits about the possible results of his "accident"; wanted an X-ray to make sure nothing was broken; said the pain of his bruises kept him from sleeping and so on. He'd worked himself up into a nervous state altogether so I gave him some barbitone—not much, I can assure you, but enough to calm him down.

"Then I cut it off and told him he must rely on himself and make an effort and so on. I suggested fresh air and exercise, at which he shuddered. He begged for more barbitone and I refused it and he got into a huff and behaved quite absurdly, as a result of which I gave him a real dressing down."

"Which did no good, I presume?"

The doctor grinned. "Absolutely none. The only result it had was that he went around the village saying that I was callous and incompetent and pretty things like that."

"It had a repercussion, though," Ferris went on. "Apparently he went up to London and saw a nerve specialist who

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did give him a prescription to keep him quiet, and then wrote and told me he'd done so."

"I don't suppose you liked that?"

"Too right, I didn't, especially as the London man rather hinted that I'd been a bit unsympathetic with Roberts. He evidently had more patience with that type than I think is good for them. In fact, I'm not sure that the whole business wasn't a bit unethical—but that's another matter."

"Thanks very much, Doctor," Austen said. "You've told me just what I want to know. Add to your kindness by telling me what your views are as to Roberts' character."

Ferris laughed. "That's easy; spiteful, untruthful, an exhibitionist and a liar."

Austen whistled softly. "A pretty catalogue! D'you think his spite would go as far as murder?"

"I wouldn't like to commit myself; I'm prejudiced."

"Yes, but *do* you?"

The doctor hesitated. "Yes, I think it could do if he worked himself up enough and had what he thought was a sufficient grudge. He's an unbalanced creature with utterly no sense of proportion, and so conceited that he'd feel sure that he could get away with murder. And that, I admit, is a thoroughly prejudiced statement, Mr. Austen."

* * * * *

William Austen arrived at the Compton's house in the middle of the afternoon.

Cecily opened the door to him, as before, and her heart sank as she saw him standing there, distinguished and

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debonair, an unwelcome visitor, whom she'd hoped never to see again. She thought that she had finished with him and his questions.

She thanked heaven that she had told her parents about his first visit, putting it down to her attendance at Waring's party—she hadn't mentioned that Mrs. Waring hadn't been there—but a second visit wasn't going to be so easy to explain away, and this time her mother was at home and very inquisitive.

Mrs. Compton was a flustered hen of a woman, who had hatched a duckling and didn't quite know what to make of its independent expeditions on to ponds outside her scope, though in a way, she was rather proud of them. Cecily's going to the Waring's was a social asset she had felt, but when it came to getting mixed up with mysterious death, she wasn't quite so sure about it.

She made an effort to sit in, so to speak, at her daughter's interview with Austen. That was partly due to curiosity, partly to some vague idea about chaperonage, and partly to a determination that she wasn't going to let anyone, especially a policeman, however little like one he looked, bully her child.

However, tact, and an air of authority and an imperious will on Austen's part, thwarted her intentions, and she had, unwillingly, to leave Cecily alone with him.

He came to the point as soon as they were shut into the little sitting room.

"Now," he began. "You've been a very silly and misguided girl, Miss Compton, and if I hadn't been willing to make a lot of allowances for you, you'd be in trouble with the police."

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She gasped. "Oh! Oh! What *do* you mean? I haven't done anything!"

"You have, you know. You lied to me, yesterday, and you tried to deceive me.

"Now, I'm going to give you a lecture. It's one I very often have to deliver, especially to people who get themselves mixed up with murder cases."

He saw her wince and open her eyes very wide at that, and guessed that he'd scared her, as he meant to.

"To lie to the police is the very height of foolishness," he went on. "It never does any good, for they always find you out in the end—they're much cleverer than you, you know—and what is more, when they've found you out, they want to know *why* you lied, because it means that you've something to hide. So they most naturally suspect that you're lying to hide something bad, something criminal, and they go to work to find out what it is. So you see, your lying hasn't done you any good in the long run and you've given yourself the unpleasantness—and sometimes worse than that—of being suspected, into the bargain."

"The only safe and sensible thing to do if you're dealing with the police, is to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, which is exactly what you haven't done."

He looked at her sternly and she quailed.

"I—I don't know—" she began, on a diminishing note.

"I'll tell you. Now, my child—for you are only a child, I hope, only silly and not wicked, and I'm going to treat you like that, until I find I'm wrong—I'm going to tell you the true story that you tried to keep from me."

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"You were in love with Jocelyn Waring—how far the thing went is your business and not, at present, mine. But you had compromised yourself with him, quite considerably. That's true, isn't it?"

She was crying now, quietly. "Yes," she admitted in a muffled voice.

"There was no question of your being 'just friends' as you tried to make me think?"

"No."

"Now, you'd quarrelled with him, but, on the day of his death, you made it up on the telephone and went to his parties. When you were leaving, in the evening, he told you that his wife was getting a divorce, but that even if he were free, he 'wouldn't make an honest woman of you'. That correct?"

"Yes," she sobbed, really crying in earnest now.

"Then tell me what your original quarrel was about."

It took him quite a long time to get that out of her. The fact was that she hated the memory of it and didn't want to remember, and that she was terrified of what use he might make of his knowledge.

"Listen," he said, at last, interrupting her evasions and excuses. "Let's face the unpleasant facts together. If I possibly can, I'll keep your name out of this—it's the publicity you're concerned about, isn't it? You were Waring's mistress and you're terrified of having it known?"

Through floods of tears, she admitted it.

"Then dry your eyes and let's talk sensibly. Was Mrs. Waring going to cite you as co-respondent? Was that the trouble?"

"No! Oh no!—At least, I don't think so. She was so

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good and kind and she said she'd never thought of a divorce—"

"Let's have the whole story," Austen persuaded her. "Crying won't do any good and it's all over and Waring's dead, and there won't be any divorce, so let's get all this straight."

His kind uncle approach eventually disarmed her, and she told him her poor little tale, rather, indeed, as she had originally told it to Juliet, with simplicity and sincerity.

"Yes, I've got all that clear," he said, at the end of it. "What I don't understand, is how, if you were feeling so disillusioned about him, he persuaded you to spend Saturday with him."

That, too, she explained. Waring had, in effect, betrayed her all over again.

He'd said, on Saturday, on the telephone, that he'd had to repudiate her in front of his wife, for various reasons, which had sounded plausible to Cecily at the time; that he wanted nothing more than to be free and to marry her.

She, poor deluded infant, had let herself believe it, because she wanted to. If you find your idols have feet of clay, it's sometimes better to cover them up and tell yourself that, under the covering, there are real feet, and forget what you've once seen was there.

At Cecily's age, it's easy to believe what you want to, and, for that one day, she'd made a good job of it. It was only when Jocelyn himself, when he said goodnight to her, and forced the truth viciously on her, that she had, at last, made herself look at her own self-induced delusions.

It was pride which had made her keep that last, vitriolic sentence of Jocelyn's from Austen.

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He could appreciate that and believe her. He told her so and she was pathetically grateful.

"You are so kind," she wept again. "It helps to talk to you, somehow. You aren't disapproving and horrid. You don't look at me as if I were a fallen woman and I don't feel like one. You see, I'd never, never have—have done what I did, only Jocelyn said we were as good as married—Oh! Oh!"

"Now, my child, calm yourself," Austen soothed, in his best avuncular manner. "It's all over and you've bought your experience and you can be glad you didn't have to pay a heavier price for it. Only do learn your lesson from it—don't ever be such a little fool again."

Half to himself, he quoted:

'When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray
What charm can soothe her melancholy—'

He broke off, took a deep breath and got back to business.

"Now you've explained why you tried to hide things," he said, "and I've understood and you're feeling better for telling me, so let's go on from there."

"But you'll *never* tell anyone," she begged him. "Never, never. I'd kill myself, I really would, if my parents ever knew about me and Jocelyn. They'd never understand, and they'd be horrified—oh! worse than that—They're so out of date—"

"There are worse things than that," he told her, gently. "However, don't worry. They shan't know through me—"

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if it can possibly be avoided, and I hope it can. Now, we really must get on.

"At that party last Saturday, would you say that anyone could have put anything into Waring's drink, if they'd wanted to?"

She considered. "Why yes! But who would?"

"You?"

"Of course not. What would I have put in, anyway?"

"Poison."

"Oh! don't be so silly—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude—but *really*! Where would I have got it from, anyway?"

"You tell me. Wouldn't there be something in the house?"

"This house? Of course not. What would we want with poison?"

"I don't know. Cecily, didn't your mother have to take sleeping pills a little while ago?"

"Yes, but that's not poison."

"It is if you take too much of it, and that's what Waring did. Someone gave him a dose of some sleeping stuff, which is harmless enough in its proper quantity, but deadly if you exceed that. I want to know where it came from."

"Well, not from this house, anyway. Mummy hated having to take that stuff. She doesn't approve of anything like that, really, and she only took it because Dr. Ferris made her. When she could do without it, she put what was left down the drain, because she didn't like having it about. I saw her do it, myself."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

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"That's all to the good then. Now one last thing: will you swear to me that you neither poisoned Waring yourself, nor know of anyone else who did or even wanted to?"

She looked at him seriously. "Of course I will. I'd tell you anything now; you've been so utterly sweet to me."

Cecily was very surprised when, only a few minutes after Austen had left her, she had a telephone call from Juliet Waring.

"I would like to have a talk with you," Juliet said. "Could you possibly come round and see me?"

For a second the girl was doubtful. "Well, not until after tea," she said.

"Then can you come then?"

"Oh yes! Mrs. Waring. I'd like to do that."

Cecily was considerably puzzled as to what Juliet could want with her, and she was even a little apprehensive about it. There was no doubt that she had a guilty feeling where Juliet was concerned, even if the cause of it was no longer there.

• However, she was soon put at her ease when she found what she was wanted for. She recounted everything which had passed between her and Austen and Juliet was immensely thankful to find that there was no longer any need to hide Cecily's part in the affair from Austen.

"How did he get to know about you and Jocelyn?" she asked.

"Honestly, Mrs. Waring, I haven't an idea. He's the more marvellous person. He seems to know things, and even what you are feeling, without being told at all."

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“That’s rather what I felt, Juliet admitted, and felt a fool when she thought how much trouble and even misery she had given herself to hide a thing which Austen had discovered with so little difficulty, and in spite of all her efforts.

After leaving the Compton’s house Austen went off to Aubrey Roberts’ cosy cot, and found its inmate sitting down to a “dainty tea”. It was arranged with exquisite care, with lace cloths and doileys, charming china and shining silver, and looked far more like a woman’s work than a man’s.

Roberts pressingly hospitable, begged Austen to join him.

“Really, Mr. Superintendent, you positively *must*, or I shall begin to feel the gyves on my wrists, and that you won’t break bread with the criminal you are about to arrest.”

The little man was intensely nervous, fluttering about, all his usual mannerisms exaggerated.

“Now, just a teentsy little bit of orange cake? I made it myself and it’s light as a feather, though I do say it. My daily woman, though *such* a good soul, has *such* a heavy hand.”

Austen let him babble for a few minutes, before he pulled him up, sharply.

“This isn’t a social visit, Mr. Roberts. I’m here on very serious business.”

“Oh dear! Oh dear! What can it be? I haven’t done anything, I promise I haven’t. Really, truly I haven’t.” Roberts’ voice shook.

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"That remains to be seen. At the moment it looks, as though you had had a very considerable motive for murdering Professor Waring."

"Oh my God! How can you say such a thing? I was really fond of poor dear Jocelyn."

"Were you? I doubt that, and I'll tell you why. You had a deep grudge against him because he humiliated you and made a laughing stock of you in front of his friends. There was one occasion in particular, which you've never forgiven him for. One evening at a restaurant—"

"Stop!" Roberts cried out, clapping his hands to his ears. "I won't listen; I won't! I won't!"

Austen didn't go on with that story, and Roberts, his face suffused with chagrin, lowered his hands.

"You hated Waring for that," Austen said. "You hated him and yet he fascinated you. You couldn't keep away from him, and yet every time he made fun of you, you hated him more and longed to get you own back."

"Then, on Saturday morning, he asked you to his house and you went and he encouraged his friends to jeer at you and the climax came. You couldn't bear it any more and you made up your mind to murder him."

"Oh no! No!" the little man cried, cringing. "You've got it all wrong! I didn't mind what Jocelyn said; it was all in fun and I didn't care in the least."

"That's not true, and you know it. You never lost a chance of denigrating Waring behind his back."

"Oh dear! Oh dear! You've got it all wrong, really you have."

"I think not. You worked yourself up all Saturday afternoon and when you went back to his house in the

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evening, you'd made up your mind that Waring should never humiliate you again. You killed him."

"But how could I?" Roberts wailed. "The papers said he was poisoned, and I haven't got any poison!"

"But you have—or had. You may have used it all up of course, on Waring. You had the sleeping stuff that the doctor in London gave you, when Merris wouldn't let you have any more."

"Oh! Oh! What shall I do? What shall I do!" he almost screamed, and burst into tears. "I didn't kill him, I didn't, I didn't, I *swear* to you. You *must* believe me."

He continued to weep and protest with such violence that he became hysterical, and Austen could see that he would get no sense out of him until he recovered.

He got up and said, sternly: "I'm going away for the present, Mr. Roberts and I advise you to pull yourself together and think of some way of proving to me that you had nothing to do with Waring's death."

He walked out of the cottage leaving the distraught little creature sobbing his frightened heart out among his pretty tea-things.

A few minutes later Austen walked into the local police station and rang up Scotland Yard. He spent some time telephoning various departments, asking questions and giving instructions and then, having had a word with Inspector Harris, went to the Bear, hoping that Curtis and Flyte would be back with the results of their afternoon's work.

They hadn't arrived, however, but there was a message

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for him, from Juliet Waring, asking if he would go and see her as soon as he could.

Naturally, he found that most interesting, and he went at once.

Alice opened the door to him with a smile, seeming almost to welcome him.

"Mrs. Waring told me to let you see her, Sir," she informed him. "I've been keeping most of her visitors out, today, only letting in the ones she specially wants to see."

"Who were they?" he wanted to know, and she told him. He didn't know whether he was surprised or not at hearing Cecily Compton's name.

"Do you think this nasty business about the Professor will be settled soon?" Alice asked. "It's awful for poor Mrs. Waring having it hanging over her like this. And then having to go to the inquest tomorrow, and they say he can't be buried until that's over. It really is very hard on her, Sir. She's bearing up and trying not to show what she feels, but I know her, and I've a feeling that she can't stand much more."

He assured her that every effort was being made to get things straightened out, and threw in one or two platitudes which seemed to satisfy her, and then she took him to the drawing-room where Juliet was waiting for him.

He gave her a quick, appraising glance as she got up from her arm chair, by the fire, to greet him.

She looked much better than she had done in the morning; her colour was better, her face less drawn and her eyes less tired.

She spoke at once: ("Thank you for coming so promptly, Mr. Austen. Do sit down. I've got a confession to make.")

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They both sat down and she took up her tale.

"I've been very stupid, I'm afraid, and I've tried to keep something from you. In my own defence, I must say that I believed—and still believe—that it could have no possible bearing on my husband's death."

He said, rather coldly: "I think that it's for me to decide about that."

"I didn't think so," she reposted, "but I realized that I was bringing myself under suspicion by my concealment, which was done from the most innocent motives. Then I found out that there was no longer any need for me to hide anything—"

He interrupted her. "So you decided to tell me something which I have already discovered for myself?"

She flushed. "It doesn't sound very nice, put like that."

"But it's the truth, isn't it?"

"In a way, but you're interpreting it wrongly."

"Then supposing you tell me the correct interpretation."

She paused for a moment and offered him a cigarette from a box by her side, took one herself and he lit them both.

Then she began to speak.

She said: "I don't find this easy. I shall have to tell you, in my own way, things which you already know. It's my motives that I want to make clear to you."

He said, gravely: "I'll do my best to understand, Mrs. Waring."

Then, smoking quietly, speaking clearly and deliberately, she told him the story.

"I found out, suddenly, Mr. Austen, that my husband had seduced a young girl whom you now know, Cecily

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Compton, promising that I would divorce him and he would marry her.

"The girl came and told me her story herself and I was most passionately sorry for her. It was a shameful thing for Jocelyn to have done, for he wouldn't have married her if he'd been free at that moment.

"I decided to divorce him after he had admitted that she wasn't by any means the first mistress he'd had since we had been married. I determined to have one of the others as co-respondent.

"I didn't want to bring Cecily into it. She is so young, and so trusting and unsophisticated that I felt it would be wicked of me to drag her—mistakes—into the limelight. It might ruin her life.

"Then Jocelyn was murdered and you started investigating. I thought that if I told you that I'd been going to divorce him, you would inevitably track down Cecily and she'd get all mixed up with it and so much harm would be done.

"So I didn't tell you. That's all, I think."

"Why are you telling me now?"

"Because I've seen Cecily and I know that she's told you all about her *affaire* with Jocelyn. She says that you have promised to suppress her small share in the whole business. After I heard that, there was no reason why I shouldn't tell you why I acted as I did.

He looked at her, keenly. "You think I've been suspecting you because you kept this back?"

"It seemed obvious to me. People who hide things from the police in a murder investigation may have a guilty reason for it."

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"Very true, of course. What guilty motive did you think I imputed to you?"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Hurt pride? Not wanting to have my status as deceived wife made public? I don't know. Women have murdered their husbands for less than Jocelyn did to me."

"And did you think that this confession of yours would remove any suspicions from you?"

"Partly, I hoped. Not entirely, I expect."

"You are very honest, I think. Mrs. Waring, this isn't meant offensively, but I must have confirmation of your story. Did you tell anyone, *before your husband's death*, that you proposed to keep Cecily Compton out of your divorce action?"

"Yes."

"Whom?"

"My parents and Robin Ridgeway, *and my lawyer*. I didn't, as a matter of fact, mention her name to any of them. I spoke of her as "a young girl", and I only told them about her at all, to show them why I couldn't ever forgive Jocelyn. I *couldn't* look on his treatment of her as a mere casual infidelity."

"I can understand that. Now, whom did you propose to cite as co-respondent?"

"I told the lawyers to find someone less vulnerable than Cecily."

"Did they do so?"

"They hadn't time. I only gave them my instructions on Saturday."

"Your husband was intending to co. . . + your suit?"

"He said so."

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"Then can't you see that that would give you a motive for murdering him?"

That startled her very much.

"No, I can't. Why?"

"If you had a reason for passionately wanting to be free—to marry some other man, for instance—and you thought you might lose your suit—"

She really smiled then. "But that's too ridiculous. I assure you that from the day that we were married, no man has ever counted for me, in that way, but Jocelyn."

There was a second's silence after that, then Austen said, very gently and very gravely: "Thank you for your honesty, Mrs. Waring."

"You *do* believe me, don't you?"

"I think I can't help it," he said. "And I admire and respect you a great deal."

CHAPTER TEN

THERE was the usual conference before dinner—grace before meat, Austen called it—when the Yard had got together over the day's findings.

Curtis reported that he had failed to discover hidden caches of barbiturate in any possible suspect's house; that everyone had been co-operative about his searches, and his conclusion was that if any one of those people had ever had any of the stuff, they had safely disposed of it all and were therefore confident that it couldn't be found.

Austen sighed. "That means that we've got to look in quite a different direction for the source. How I wish murderers would go and buy their poisons neatly from the nearest chemist. Think of the hours it would save!"

"I've one bit of good news," Curtis went on. "Ridge-way can be counted out, I think."

"Excellent. How?"

"Lack of opportunity. He wasn't at the party; we know that, and he must have been in his own home from 8.15 to nine."

"I'm glad to hear it. There's complete proof?"

"Yes, and it came out more or less by chance. He was in the pub he said he was in until at least eight. Several people recognized him and noticed when he left. It would take him

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ten minutes to get from there to his house and at 8.25 he had a telephone call from London. He'd never thought about it until I asked him if he hadn't rung anyone or been rung up during the time we wait to check. Then he remembered this. The call was from one of his authors, who talked for twenty solid minutes. The exchange verifies that.

"At 8.45 he rang up his parents, who live in Devon, and that's verified, too. So you see, he couldn't have been in Woodstock, poisoning Waring."

"You're right." Austen gave a sigh of relief. "We've finished bothering about him, then. Flyte, have you any good news for me?"

The Sergeant nodded. "My hunt the thimble has been as rewarding as the Inspector's, Sir. I've found Les Girls."

"Good man! What about them?"

"Pure as the driven snow, I should say. A batch of baggages, by all accounts, but nothing worse. It was one another they hated, and they're all in good health up to the moment of speaking—at least, I can guarantee that two of them are."

"Which two?"

"Margot and Dolores. They live in a village the other side of Oxford, where everyone knows everyone else. I heard all about them and then I went to see them and they talked—*how* they talked. They told me all about each other, with no holds spared and oh! "I learnt about women from 'er', Sir."

"And you've lost your girlish laughter? Well, what about the third one?"

"I've certainly heard about her, but I haven't seen her. She got the wanderlust on Sunday afternoon and went off

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on a bus. She's like that, apparently and very artistic. Paints queer pictures and sunbathes in the garden—definitely not well looked at in those parts. She lives alone—mostly—and is in the habit of going off at a moment's notice. I mean, no one was surprised that she said, at the local on Sunday morning, that she was fed up with the local scenery and was off with the raggle taggle gypsies oh, later in the day. She left word with her daily that she'd probably be back in a few days but she'd write when she made up her mind. No address given."

"Did you find out anything about her?"

"Only gossip. Her kind neighbours say that she's 'supposed' to be a grass widow with a husband abroad, but has a succession of young men at the cottage. She's good-looking 'if you like that kind of looks'—all the usual kind of catty village stuff."

"Nothing to connect her with Waring?"

"Nothing at all."

"But she went off into the blue the day after he was murdered."

"She made no effort to hide it, though, Sir."

"True. Well, we can't eliminate her, unfortunately. That's what I want to do now—throw out the discards. What's the lady's name, by the way?"

"Maria Mars, 'she calls herself'—I quote, and it's pronounced foreign like: María. That's not approved of, either. What's wrong with the good old-fashioned Maria, as in the Black variety?"

"Well, we can't hold that against her."

Curtis put in: "We could put out an all stations call for her."

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"Yes, but I'm hoping we mayn't need to."

"Are you on to something?" Curtis demanded.

"I may be. At any rate, I'm ready to do a bit of elimination."

"That's good news. Who can be crossed off?"

Austen sat back in his chair and refilled his pipe before he answered.

"Cecily Compton," he began. "She's too young and too silly to plan a neat murder. She had no access to means, and, so far as my reasoning goes, no motive."

Curtis said: "I thought she'd been having an *affaire* with Waring?"

"Undoubtedly, and she's still more-than half in love with him. She continued to hope against hope that he'd get a divorce from his wife and marry her. She'd prefer him alive, in that case."

"What about fear of being a co-respondent—publicity and all that?"

"I don't believe it ever entered her childish mind. So long as her parents didn't know what she'd been up to, that was all she cared about.

"Moreover, she had no thoughts of revenge and I wouldn't expect her to have. In my opinion she's just an unsophisticated little girl, flattered by the attentions of a very sophisticated and experienced older man and led badly astray by him. Unless my powers of judgment have completely deserted me, she's as incapable of this murder as I am. All her concealments were to save her face—and can you be surprised? She'd been badly let down."

"No impending consequences?" Curtis asked.

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"How discreet you are, my dear chap! None, I'm happy to say."

"Then she's off the list?"

"If you trust me."

"Which I always do, in matters like this, as you very well know," said Curtis laughing. "Next, then?"

"Mrs. Waring."

The other two detectives were surprised and said so.

Austen grinned. "I didn't expect you to agree with me so I'll have to try to convince you."

"First of all, I don't think she had an opportunity. She says that while she was driving round the outskirts of the village on Saturday evening, she passed a man she knew who waved to her. She thinks he'll remember. I have his name and address and you can look him up, Flyte, but I believe her. She's too clever to try to tell me a story that can't be proved."

"That, according to her, was well after nine, and she hopes this man will remember the time."

"Now, nine was the latest hour at which Waring can have been alive—so work that one out for yourselves."

"It doesn't absolutely *prove* that she couldn't have gone back to the house *before* that," Curtis objected.

"I agree but I do think that's unlikely. Supposing she had done, she risked being seen coming or going; she would have had to risk leaving her car somewhere and being noticed, and if she were guilty, she wouldn't have done that."

"What you've got to remember about her, is that she writes detective stories; good ones. I read one of them last night and this morning, and I can assure you that it was dam' well worked out. She knows what she's doing; she's

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well up in police procedure and she sees ahead. Believe me, if she set out to do a murder, she'd see to it that suspicion *couldn't* fall on her."

Curtis still looked a little doubtful. "You're a better judge of character than I am, and you've seen more of her, so I'll take your word for it."

"But unwillingly!"

The other man laughed. "Put it that I'm not completely convinced. But you've got more up your sleeve, I can see."

"Not about opportunity. Let's take access, next. You yourself, Curtis, have said that there's no sign of any barbitone in the Waring's house, and you can't trace any prescription for it to Mrs. Waring. Then how did she get hold of a lethal dose?"

"The Professor had some," Flyte put in.

"Admitted. But how did she get access to that? Wouldn't he have noticed if some had disappeared? He seems to have kept it in his rooms in Leicester; it's only a fortnight or so since she decided to end their marriage, and she hasn't been in his rooms since."

"Still, you don't know that she didn't suspect him before that," Curtis objected. "She may really have known for ages and not let on about it; just made up her mind to get rid of him by poison and say nothing."

"I admit that, but I think it's far-fetched. Everyone agrees that she was devoted to him and had no suspicions of him at all. And what possible motive could she have?"

"Woman scorned," Flyte suggested. "One of us said it before."

"Women do murder for that," Austen agreed. "But not, I think, the quiet, civilized ones like Mrs. Waring. She was

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kill his wife and she could keep him if she wanted to. A man can get away from his mistress, but not so easily from his wife."

"She wanted a divorce and he was going to fight, so she had to kill him to get rid of him," Curtis hazarded.

"I don't think that will do, either. That idea was all very well before we knew the inner implications of this business. It all looks different now. Why should she want her freedom so much that she was prepared to kill to get it?"

"To marry again."

"But whom?"

"Ridgeway seems obvious."

"Too obvious. She's not in love with him if I know anything about human nature. She has none of my uncle's signs upon her, to misquote. He taught me how to know a woman in love."

"But he's in love with *her*."

"That's another matter. She's extremely fond of him; she may eventually become more so, but—well, she assured me that she'd never thought about any man but her husband in that way, and I believed her."

"You're determined that she shall be innocent," Curtis remarked with a smile.

Austen chuckled. "I am. I'll admit it, but only because my reason, as well as my instinct, tells me so."

"Accepting your judgment, as always, Sir," Flyte said, "Who takes her place as first suspect?"

"That's another matter. What do you think yourself?"

"I'm fancy free, if you take Mrs. Waring away from me."

"What do you both think of Aubrey Roberts?"

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"*That!*" they cried simultaneously.

"That. It had motive, means and opportunity, and the temperament to do a nasty sneaking trick like popping poison into his host's glass."

Curtis said, slowly: "I'd like to think that over. I want to know more about Lucille Trentham, too."

"She had motive and opportunity, but what about means?"

"Well, we aren't *certain* about that in anyone's case. Not a hundred per cent, I mean. We can't trace the possession of it to anyone, but that's not to say that we never shall."

"True. Those two, however, are the only ones who seem to have adequate motive, plus the temperament to murder. I think we'd better discuss them in some detail."

They did that and then Austen summed up.

"We seem to be agreed that Roberts is the more likely suspect, don't we? I'm in full agreement, but before we go any further, I want to know more about him, personally. How do we go about that?"

"His friend Percival?" Curtis suggested.

"Yes, of course. Flyte, you once saw Shelley plain when you went about the barbiturates. What's he like? Same type as Roberts, I suppose?"

Flyte nodded. "Essentially, I imagine, but with a difference. He's younger—about twenty-five and such a pretty boy. Small and wavy haired and beautifully brown—Elizabeth Arden suntan I should guess. The very sporting type he wants you to think. His rooms are full of trophies of the chase; cricket bats, riding crops, tennis and squash racquets hung about the wall, all nicely dusted. I'll bet he never hit a ball in anger though! The only thing that's

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missing is a pair of oars. Pity, he'd have made a lovely cox."

"On the lines of 'all rowed fast, but none so fast as Reginald'?" Austen grinned.

"That's the idea. Anyway it's Spectator Sports for him every time, but he does like to be thought a great big outdoor boy."

"Sounds harmless enough, though not exactly engaging. I think we shall have to pay a call on him, and see what he can tell us about Roberts' feelings towards Waring. At present, we've only got Mrs. Burnett's words for his intense grudge, in that respect, and that was really nothing more than gossip."

"Well, you interviewed him," Curtis put in. "What did you feel about it?"

"Methought the gentleman did protest too much. He overstressed his affection for 'Jocelyn poor pet'—and so on. But, you know, it doesn't do to judge too much by that kind of thing from people of his kind. We must ask someone who knows him better, so off we go."

They found Percival, whose surname, incidentally, was Percival, in his flat, in his shirt sleeves, washing up his dinner things, with a pretty frilly plastic apron tied round his slim waist to protect his pale, dove grey slacks.

He whipped it off with apologies, and led his obviously unwelcome guests to what he called his lounge, which was embellished, as Flyte had reported, with all kinds of implements for the playing of games.

When he had removed the apron, he put a very sporting

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checked hacking jacket over his delicate silk shirt, and evidently very nervous, waited for what might be coming next.

He hadn't Roberts' mannerisms. His were of quite a different kind. He affected the clean limbed young English Athlete, not too bluff and hearty; more on the breezy side, with a wind on the heath, Brother undercurrent—until he was questioned and then the role slipped a bit.

He agreed that Waring's death was a tragedy, but it didn't, he said, affect him, personally, very deeply, because Saturday was the first time he'd ever met the dead man.

"Your friend Aubrey Roberts must be badly upset about it," Austen suggested. "He knew Waring well, didn't he?"

"Oh yes!" Percival assured him, anxiously. "They were the greatest friends. Poor Aubrey is simply overcome. He feels it terribly."

"There's no truth, then, in the rumour that Roberts had been unforgivably insulted by Waring, and went around vowing he'd pay him back for it?"

"Oh no! Oh no, indeed! None. Of course not. Professor Waring was such a witty man and Aubrey admired him for it. He often told me about the funny things the Professor said, and they made me laugh so much. That's why I was so pleased to go to his party and meet him."

"And did he make you laugh, too?"

Percival nodded, nervously. "Oh yes! He simply had me in stitches."

"Didn't you find him a bit malicious?"

He was gaining confidence. "Oh no! No! Merely devastatingly witty." Then, with a sudden reversion to his chosen manner he said, breezily: "Of course, any chap expects to be ragged now and then, but it would be a poor type

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“No couldn’t take it as it was meant—all in fun, you know, all in fun.”

“Roberts took it all in fun?”

“Well—more or less, you know. Of course, a good school teaches one to stand up to a bit of ragging, and dear old Aubrey hadn’t that advantage, but he didn’t *really* mind, you know.”

“That’s not quite according to my information,” Austen said, firmly. “Are you prepared to swear that Roberts never resented Waring’s treatment of him? Swear, mind you.”

Percival’s nervousness was coming back again and he started hedging.

“Oh well! Perhaps he was sometimes just a little bit hurt, you know, but he soon got over it. He never bore any *malice*.”

“What would you call it, then?”

“Call what?”

“Whatever it was that made him go round denigrating Waring, whenever he found a chance?”

That seemed to put Percival in rather an awkward corner, and he cast around for a way out.

“That was only just a little bit of temper, you know. It didn’t last and he soon got over it. We all get a bit annoyed at times, don’t we?” he added, with an effort at nice boyish frankness.

Austen felt that he had his answer, and left the subject.

“Now,” he went on. “About that party on Saturday—Waring was given his lethal dose sometime during its progress. Did you see anything whatever, anything at all, mind you, to suggest that Roberts or anyone else, put something besides drink into Waring’s glass?”

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The effect of that question was startling. Under his tan, Elizabeth Arden or otherwise, the blood drained from Percival's face, leaving it a kind of dirty grey. His hands shook, his lips twitched and he became totally unable to speak.

Austen repeated his question and again waited for an answer.

"Come," he said at last. "Surely you can say yes or no?"

"I—I was thinking—" Percival stammered, eventually. "No! No, of course I didn't. Of course not."

When further pressed, he persisted in his denial, but he was still in a state of panic and his answers came mechanically and with no sense of conviction.

Finally, Austen decided to leave him alone, feeling sure that he would get no more satisfaction for the time being.

His parting words were stern.

"You know more about this than you're willing to admit, Percival," he said. "You had better think again about trying to keep your knowledge from me. In the long run you'll do no good by trying to shield anyone else and you'll only get yourself into trouble."

"Think over what I've said, and when you've made up your mind to be sensible, let me know. It will be far better for you, in the long run."

* * * * *

The three detectives took themselves off. So soon as they were clear of the house, Austen spoke.

"If ever I saw naked terror in anyone's face, that was the time," he said. "Presumably he knows that his friend

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Aubrey is guilty, or, at any rate, he suspects him and doesn't know what to do about it. I'm sorry for him, in a way. It's a nasty position to be in."

"You wouldn't think he did it himself?" Curtis asked.

"Why should he? He was meeting Waring for the first time; he couldn't have had a murderous grudge against him, even on Roberts' behalf; he hadn't any access to the barbitone, so far as we know. Of course, he can't be washed out of the case, but I don't feel any active suspicion about him. My own surmise is that he'll come and tell us a half truth, tomorrow, and hope to get away with it—which he won't. If he doesn't come of his own accord, we shall have to send for him and put some more pressure on."

"You're not doing anything more about Roberts, Sir?" Flyte wanted to know.

"Not at the moment. It's too soon. I can't yet prove his possession of barbitone, and, so far, I've only Dr. Ferris's statement that he had another source of supply. I've rung up the Yard and asked them to check that with the London man who's said to have prescribed it. I've also got one of the local constables watching Roberts rather ostentatiously. If he thinks we're suspecting him seriously, he might panic and give himself away."

"As how?"

"I haven't an idea, but it would be convenient, wouldn't it?"

That evening, Juliet had an unexpected visitor—Dr. Hentshell.

He seemed to be feeling some embarrassment, and she

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tried to put him at his ease, guessing that he had come to offer her condolences, and knowing from personal experience, what a difficult and thankless task that is.

He told her, diffidently, how much he sympathised with her in her loss, and then with obvious relief at having got that over, changed the subject.

"I was wondering," he began, "if you had yet thought what you were going to do about your husband's manuscripts?"

"I haven't thought about it, at all," she told him. "What exactly, did you mean?"

"Well, I believe that he was at work on a new book, and I wondered if you would like me to go through what he had already done, and see if it could be put into shape for publication. To edit it, in fact."

"That's very very kind of you, Dr. Hentshell, but isn't it asking you to take too much trouble?"

He assured her that it wasn't; that it would be a task after his own heart and so on, and eventually it was settled that he would read the Mss. and then give her his opinion about them.

"Then," he suggested. "If you would give me the keys of your husband's rooms at Leycester, I will begin at once."

"Oh!" Juliet remembered. "I haven't got the keys. The Scotland Yard men took them. You'll have to go to them."

He arranged to do so, and then, after a little small talk, which didn't come easily to him, he said goodnight and left her.

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He arrived at the Bear just as Austen was finishing dinner, and waited for him in the lounge.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you," he apologised, when Austen appeared, "and I won't keep you long. I've simply come to ask you if I may have the keys of Professor Waring's rooms in Leicester."

Austen was surprised at that. "Now I wonder why?"

"How stupid of me; I should have explained. Mrs. Waring wants me to go through her husband's papers for her, and see if he has left anything ready for publication."

"I see. Do you think that likely?"

"Well, he was at work on a book and though it might be incomplete, there might be enough to publish, with a little judicious revision."

"Who would do that?"

"Oh! I should. That's my subject, you know, so I'm quite competent."

Austen smiled. "I'm sure you are. That isn't what I was thinking of. Surely you would find it an onerous task to revise another man's work, and I imagine you are a busy man."

"I am, Mr. Austen, but, I should consider it worth while. Waring was a considerable scholar, you know, and his work should not be wasted."

"You don't suppose that it could be published as it stands?"

"That would surprise me. One doesn't want to speak ill of the dead, but Waring was a curious mixture. He would have brilliant ideas and then not take the trouble to verify them. He made one or two startling discoveries but they weren't always complete, but, if they pleased him, he

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would assume that they were. One could not allow—I could not, at any rate, a book which was supposed to be authoritative to go into the world unless it had been checked and re-checked.”

“And you would feel that it was worth while doing that yourself?”

“I would, indeed. Otherwise Mrs. Waring might permit publication of the thing as it stands. One cannot expect a writer of fiction to have a scholar’s regard for strict accuracy.”

“The truth, the whole truth—?”

“And nothing but the truth, Mr. Austen, is what I demand.”

He thereupon proceeded to give a lecture, almost his confession of faith, on the subject of historical accuracy; the integrity of scholarship and the venality of anyone who, wittingly or unwittingly, neglected either. It was thoroughly interesting to Austen, not only in itself, but as a sidelight on the man’s character.

When it was over, Hentshell said: “I do hope I haven’t been boring you. That is a matter on which I feel intensely strongly.”

“So I gathered and I wasn’t bored in the least. Well, Dr. Hentshell, I see no reason why you shouldn’t have Waring’s keys. We had them to search his rooms for anything which might give us a clue to his death and we found nothing. So the keys are of no more use, and when you’ve finished with them you might just hand them back to Mrs. Waring.”

When he rejoined Curtis and Flyte, Austen said: “I find that I want to know more about Dr. Hentshell.”

“Not another suspect sprung up?” Curtis demanded.

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“No,” Austen replied slowly, but with a lack of conviction. “Only someone who would, I believe, think he had adequate motives for wanting, if not compassing, Waring’s death. Flyte would you ring up Ridgeway and make an appointment for me with him tomorrow morning, not too late.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT ten the next day Austen was at Robin's flat, which was the ground floor of a large Victorian house, which had been so cleverly converted into flats, that the ground floor, at any rate, felt like a real house.

The room into which Austen was taken had french windows on to a charming garden, and its walls were lined with books.

Robin, sitting at a table stacked with manuscripts, got up to greet his visitor.

"I can't imagine what you want with me, Mr. Austen. Your Inspector told me that I was no longer on the danger list, so to speak."

Austen gave him a friendly smile. "Correct. What I've come for is your help. I want your views on the relation between Waring and Dr. Hentshell, who is also one of your clients, I believe?"

"Yes, he is, but he doesn't give me much to do. He's a very slow, because he's a meticulously accurate worker. It's a positive fetish."

"Waring wasn't like that?"

"On the contrary. He worked quickly and, according to Hentshell, inaccurately."

"I think Hentshell resented that?"

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"I'll say he did. He took Waring's last book almost as a personal insult because of that. He breathed fire and slaughter, in other words, exposure and odium, on Waring because of what he called gross deceptions, by which he meant unverified statements, and that kind of thing."

"You're telling me just what I want to know. Go on and tell me more. Had he a personal dislike of Waring?"

"That's difficult to explain. I don't think he felt much either way towards Waring as Waring, but Waring as an inaccurate scholar—well, he hated his guts."

"Interesting," Austen commented. "To continue, was there any other reason than the defence of pure scholarship, for Hentshell's feelings? Jealousy, for instance?"

"Possibly. I don't know anything about that, personally, and Hentshell never mentioned it, but Oxford gossip says that he ought to have had Waring's Chair and nearly did so. I sound rather as if I'm telling tales out of school, I'm afraid, but I do realize that a murder enquiry is no time to be chivalrously secretive."

"I wish more people thought so. Lastly, do you think that Hentshell is capable of having murdered Waring?"

Ridgway took a minute to think that over. Finally, he said:

"No. Of wishing he were dead, yes, but, except when he's riding his hobby horse, I should say that he was essentially a quiet man; a thinker, not a doer. But, mind you, I don't know him well, and I rather doubt if anyone does."

"Well, thank you, Ridgeway. You've been a lot of help and I hope I shan't have to trouble you again."

Austen rang up Osbert Hentshell then, but couldn't get

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hold of him. He was out and no one knew when he would be back.

That being so, there was no object in staying longer in Oxford. It wouldn't be profitable to talk to Lucille Trentham again, at that juncture, so Austen drove back to Woodstock and called in at the police station, where he found everyone in rather a panic. Aubrey Roberts had disappeared.

Inspector Harris, with freedom, fluency and point, was explaining to the luckless P.C. who had let Roberts evade him, just what his fate was likely to be in this world and the next, when Austen walked in, in time to hear the peroration. So far, apparently, P.C. Woodcote had hardly been allowed to say a word in his own defence.

"Now then, what's all this?" Austen burlesqued.

"Woodcote's let that blasted little Roberts slip through his fingers, Sir."

Flyte chuckled. "You got your reaction all right, Sir. Put the wind up the little so and so good and proper, by the look of it."

"'The Wicked flee when no man pursueth'? Looks like it. Well," Austen turned to Harris. "Let's hear all about it, Inspector."

"Better let Woodcote tell you, himself," Harris said.

Woodcote was only too pleased to be allowed to have a word in his own defence.

He had come on duty after midnight the previous evening for a stretch of watching Roberts and his cottage.

The man who he relieved had told him that Roberts was safe indoors, and that all the lights in the cottage were out before eleven.

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Nothing happened all night. At eight in the morning the milkman came, rang the bell and got no answer.

He commented: "Sleeping late again," to Woodcote, and left a pint.

The house remained silent and the P.C. prowled around it, noting that the upstairs curtains were still closed.

At nine the baker came, got no answer to his ring at the kitchen door and said: "Well, he can jolly well come and fetch his bread, if he wants it."

Woodcote asked if that often happened and the baker gave his opinion of Roberts, and reported that he was more often than not asleep when his bread came.

"Lazy devil," the baker said. "Lies in bed till all hours."

The postman paid his visit, dropped some letters into the box and went away, and silence once more settled round the cottage, until soon after ten, when an Oxford tradesman turned up with a parcel which had to be signed for.

By this time P.C. Woodcote was getting what he described as not anxious but a bit bothered, so he decided that it would be in order to try to wake Roberts.

Ringling, knocking and even throwing pebbles at the upstairs window, had no effect, and he felt that sterner measures were indicated.

He tried the back door, found it unlocked, and decided that it wouldn't be breaking and entering if he had a look inside.

Finally, he searched every room in the cottage and found no trace of its owner, and then he became worried in earnest and went to the police station to report.

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Austen heard the tale with interest and asked some questions.

"So," he said, finally, "there's really no guaranteeing that he was there when you took over, Woodcote?"

Light dawned, with relief on the P.C.'s face.

"Well, nor there isn't!" he exclaimed. "He could've hooked it while Morris was on duty!"

"I think we'd better go round to the cottage and have a look for ourselves," Austen told Harris. "No need for you to come if you don't want to. But, first of all, had Roberts a car?"

—It appeared that he hadn't; only a motorised bicycle which was kept in a shed at the back of the house.

"Send out an all stations call, then, for both man and bicycle—if we find that's gone. He might have left it somewhere and got on a train."

It was easy enough to see, when the Yard men got to the cottage, how Roberts could have got away. It would have taken two men to watch the cottage adequately, for, though the front door opened on a path which led direct to the road, the back door was surrounded by shrubs, which also hid the little path which led to a lane, which was little more than a track.

The bicycle was not in its shed and could have been wheeled, silently, down the back path, and the engine not switched on until other traffic was encountered.

"If Roberts had known that his house was being watched, it would have been simple for him to watch too, and when the constable was patrolling the front, to have made his

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way out at the back. If anyone were to be blamed for his escape, it was Inspector Harris, for not having put two men on the job. "Roberts has more or less done our job for us," Curtis commented. "Men don't bolt unless they're guilty."

"I wouldn't go so far as that," Austen told him. "Let's be fair. Innocent people have been known to run away sooner than tell what they know."

"I thought you'd convinced yourself that he's our man. You convinced me, anyway."

Austen didn't reply to that, and led the way into the cottage.

Everything downstairs was scrupulously neat, but in Roberts' bedroom there were signs of hasty packing. Clothes lay on the bed, which had not been slept in, as though they had been taken out and discarded.

An empty suitcase stood on a chair, and, on its lid, there were marks which indicated that a much smaller one habitually stood on top, in some place which didn't get dusted very often.

That proved to be the roof space under the eaves, which held various pieces of luggage, and showed that more had very recently been moved.

A cash box, which lay on the dressing-table was empty, and everything indicated a hasty flitting.

"Well, that's that," Austen said, after they'd looked round. "I wonder where he decided to make for? I want him just as fast as I can get him. We'll go and see Percival Percival and see if he can give us a lead."

Percival lived in one of those small, modern blocks of

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flats with no lifts and no porter, and they had to climb to the top floor, though that was only up three flights of stairs.

They got no answer to their continual ringing and Flyte remarked "Supposing he's skipped, too."

There was a second pause and then Austen said: "It's a flimsy lock. Curtis, will you oblige?"

The door was quickly opened and they stepped into a tiny hall and all three of them stopped dead, simultaneously, and began to sniff.

"Gas!" Austen exclaimed. "That door, I think."

He pointed and they flung open the sitting room door and the gas poured out.

The room was in darkness, and Curtis felt round for the light switch and clicked it on, while Austen, his handkerchief held over his mouth and nose, dashed in to turn off the gas fire.

Percival was sitting by that, huddled in a low easy chair.

Austen came out to breathe for a second, then he and Curtis together, carried Percival out, while Flyte ran around opening windows and doors.

They laid Percival on his bed and looked at him for a second.

"He's been dead for hours," Curtis opined, "judging by the state of the rigor."

Austen agreed and told Flyte to call a doctor.

"He's on his way, Sir," he reported some minutes later.

While they waited, the three of them got to work on their preliminary examination. They were so used to working together that words between them were unnecessary,

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and each got on with his own job quickly and silently.

The doctor arrived and took one look at Percival.

"Quite dead," he said. "Suicide?"

"Presumably," Austen agreed. "You'll do a P.M. of course. Could you let me have the results quickly?"

"I'll do my best."

"I want to know if he was drunk or drugged before the gas took effect."

"I'll look out for that, then. I'll send the ambulance along as quickly as I can."

"Thanks, Doctor."

When he'd gone the detectives carried on with their work and then, finally, sat down to compare notes.

"Suicide?" Curtis queried, in a sarcastic voice.

"You don't think so?" Austen asked.

"No. It's a funny one, if it is. How did you turn the gas tap off?"

"By the edges. I left no prints."

"Well, there aren't any fingerprints on it at all."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised. There's no suicide note."

"And you can bet there would have been with a type like that."

"One would certainly have expected it."

"Now. As you see, there's a tray on this table with a used glass and an empty gin bottle and half a jug of water."

"There are wet rings on that tray—still wet, you'll notice, which suggests that it was fairly late when he had his drinks."

"All those things must be analysed and printed, of course."

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Curtis put in: "I've printed them. There are only Percival's prints on them."

"I wish I knew how much he drank and if he were an habitual drinker. However, we may find that out later."

"Now, he wrote a letter last night—There are comparatively fresh marks on the blotting paper on that desk. I can't read them, though, because they're fragmentary. If he used the pen which is lying there, that's not surprising. It writes rather dry and the ink wouldn't need much blotting. But where's the letter?"

"Perhaps he went out and posted it."

Flyte said: "There are torn up letters in the rubbish bin in the kitchen."

He produced several pieces of paper for the others to look at.

"They're only beginnings," he added, "Attempts, I should think, at a letter which may never have been finished. They're in a nasty damp condition and you'd better not handle them. They're all variants on 'Darling Aubrey, The police suspect me and I can't bear it. What am I to do?' Some fragments are longer and some shorter, some are very hysterical but they all mean the same thing. In one, he says 'the police have been here asking me questions about Jocelyn Waring and I don't know what to tell them'. He seems to have felt that he needed help from his darling Aubrey."

"Which, presumably he didn't get," Curtis suggested. "That makes it look more like suicide."

"It does, if this is really his writing," Austen put in.

"That must be checked, of course—and fingerprints when the paper's dry."

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"And what about the absence of prints on the gas tap?"

"Well," Curtis agreed, "He might have used a handkerchief to turn it on. I noticed that it was fairly stiff."

Flyte had more to report. "No one saw any visitor come here last night. There are three flats in this block, one to a floor. The people in the bottom one were at home all the evening and awake until eleven. They were watching the television programme, though, and don't think they'd have heard anyone going up the stairs while it was on, so that doesn't mean a thing. The front door is rarely ever closed, except in the coldest weather, and never locked.

"These people have a telephone, which Percival sometimes asked to be allowed to use. He did so yesterday, and I should think it would be soon after you'd been here, Sir. Mrs. Whoever-she-is doesn't know to whom the call was, or anything about it, because, as she says, she always goes out of the room if anyone's phoning."

"And it's automatic and can't be traced, of course," Austen said bitterly.

"Exactly. The people in the flat under this are away, so they're no use about visitors. So we're no further on that way."

Just then the ambulance arrived to take away Percival's body, and the conference was interrupted.

When all was quiet again they resumed their investigations, which, for the most part, weren't very productive.

One or two important facts did, however, emerge.

Judging by the stubs of some cheque books which they

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found, the writing on the torn up notes was Percival's.

There were no fingerprints anywhere in the kitchen or sitting room but his, and there weren't many of those. Door handles and fingerplates, table, chair arms, mantelpiece and even the fender, had been wiped clean.

"Well," Curtis asked, "Where do we go from here? What's the verdict?"

"Murder or suicide, of course," Austen said. "You pays your money and you takes your choice. I can make a case out for either, can't you?"

Curtis nodded. "Supposing you do it."

"Right. A. Percival got scared by our visit. He had some important thing to hide or he was implicated in Waring's death and called on Roberts for help. Roberts was too busy saving his own skin to bother, told Percival he must look after himself and that proved the final straw. He wrote a letter—to Roberts, I suggest, reproaching him, and having an orgy of emotion, went out and posted it and then came back to finish himself off.

"He got pretty tight on gin, turned on the gas tap and made himself comfortable in that chair and—Finis."

"That all sounds tenable," Curtis agreed, "And accounts for the absence of the suicide note. If your theory's right, the letter should turn up at Roberts' cottage by the second post, if there is such a thing in these parts."

"That's my idea."

"Well, let's hear theory B."

"Murder. Percival knew that Roberts was guilty, but didn't want to give him away if he could save his skin without. He was scared stiff, of course, by my visit, and telephoned Roberts for help or advice, which wasn't forth-

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coming. Percival then wrote Roberts an urgent letter, saying that he'd have to tell the truth.

"Roberts, who decided to clear out, anyway, came round here and found Percival in such a panic that he was liable to blurt out the truth at any moment.

"He suggested that they should have a drink, doped Percival's gin and when the stuff had taken effect, cleared up all traces of his visit, turned on the gas fire and departed.

"I like that theory. It shows the type of low cunning I should expect from Roberts. He'd argue that we should decide that Percival was guilty and suicided himself because of it. Roberts would then no longer be suspected because we should be satisfied that we'd got our murderer."

"Why should Roberts clear out then?" Flyte objected. "If he thought we'd accept what he'd planned for us?"

"Because he hadn't the nerve to stay. He'd feel that, as Percival's great friend, he'd be asked questions by us and he couldn't face it. In any case, this is all the merest guesswork, but putting myself as far as I can, into the mind of someone of Robert's type, that's how I'd expect it to function."

They went along to the police station then, to report Percival's death and their investigations, and to find out if there were any news of Roberts to hand as yet.

Inspector Harris was thoroughly shocked to hear that yet another sudden death had occurred in his Manor, and even more so when he was told that there was a chance of its proving to be a murder.

"Roberts, he said, had not yet been traced, but, almost

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as he said it, news came in that his bicycle had been found apparently abandoned, in a country lane outside Abington.

"Making West, I've no doubt," he commented. "Bristol, most likely. There's a good bus service from all over the place."

"You think he left his bicycle and went on by bus?" Austen asked.

"Or train. Seems likely, doesn't it? Surprising how criminals always make for the sea when they bolt. Seem to think there are ships to be got any minute and we'll never think of it."

"That's true, of course, but I don't think it does to assume that Roberts is trying to get abroad. It's a theory, of course, and a line to work on, but there are alternatives. If he does try Bristol, he should be picked up easily enough trying to get a passage. But I would argue that he won't try that unless he has money—and a passport too, of course."

• "What do you suggest then, Superintendent?" Curtis asked. He and Austen were always most punctilious in speaking to one another in public, though in private they used Christian names.

• "His bank first," Austen said. "Let's hope he keeps his account locally. It'll make it much easier. Inspector Harris, could you deal with that? I'd suggest ringing up the local bank and find out if he uses one of them, and, if so, if he drew money out in any quantity yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Flyte echoed, when Harris had gone to the telephone. "But Waring was killed on Saturday."

• "Yes, but if Roberts killed him, it was without premeditation. Therefore, he wouldn't have known on Saturday

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morning, in time, that he might need to bolt. The banks close at twelve on Saturdays, Roberts wasn't even asked to Waring's house until after that. If he's the murderer—and mind you, it's not yet a hundred per cent that he is—the idea came to him at the morning session and he took the dope along and put it into action in the evening. That's how I read it, anyway. Still, let's make assurance etc. You go and tell Harris to say 'lately' and not specify any particular day."

It wasn't long before Harris came back to say that Roberts did bank in the village, that he paid all his bills by cheque and usually drew five pounds a week in cash. He hadn't exceeded this for several months.

"That's that, then," Austen commented. "Unless, of course, he keeps another account somewhere else, and that wouldn't help him on Monday, if he were proposing to bolt abroad on Tuesday night. We must think of something else."

Curtis suggested: "There's his passport, of course."

"Yes Flyte, get on the telephone about that. Find out if he held one and if it was in order."

Austen pursued his alternatives.

"He must have had some purpose in going to Abingdon—unless he were trying to bluff us. That hardly seems likely as it would waste so much of his time in getting clear away. After all, if he were going to London, for instance, Oxford would be his best bet. Buses and trains are frequent and there are lots of people about to hide amongst."

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"Do you think he'd think of that?" Curtis queried.

"As I said before, I give him credit for a certain low cunning. I feel that Abingdon must lead somewhere—he has friends or relations in that direction; people who'll either provide him with money or a hiding place."

He turned to the local men: "Inspector, can you help in that direction? Who would know about it? He presumably went away sometimes and had his letters forwarded? Would the postman know?"

Harris considered. "Maybe, or his charwoman, Mrs. Bennett."

"Would you see about that, then?"

"Certainly," Harris said, and went out.

Presently Flyte was back. "He has a passport and it's in order."

"Good. That's one fact established, then. Now, Flyte, I've a job for you. I want you to go to Abingdon and get on the trail from there. It's not too big a place, and he may have been noticed—the station, the bus stops and so on."

"Right, Sir. I'll go and find out how to get there."

Austen gave him a friendly grin. "You can take my car; you'll be quicker that way. Go and fill her up and yourself, too; lunch is indicated—then off you go, and if you drive that car any faster than you would if I were in her, you're back to the beat, my lad."

* * * * *

Flyte, looking positively ecstatic, hurried off, and Curtis turned to smile at Austen.

"That's a nice boy, William."

"And he's going to make a good detective."

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"Thanks to you. You've taught him all he knows, and a good bit more too, which he won't realise until he's older."

"You've done a lot yourself, Owen."

"I've done my best, but you've more to teach than I have. Besides, you've encouraged him and, as you'd quote yourself if I gave you the chance: 'Approbation from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed'."

"Perhaps that applies to both of us in Flyte's case, old chap. Anyway, I know that if someone had patted me on the back occasionally, when I was young, when I'd deserved it, my policeman's lot would have been a happier one. Now come on and let's have a drink before we eat for this afternoon looks like being a busy one."

CHAPTER TWELVE

OVER their pre-lunch beer, which seemed to go down particularly well after what they'd been through that morning, Curtis asked :

“What do we do next?”

Austen smiled. “Well, I suppose we've got to discuss it, though it seems a pity to disturb a good drink with business. A couple of interviews, I'm afraid; one for you and one for me.”

“With whom?”

“Yours with Lucille Trentham, mine with Dr. Hentshell.”

Curtis looked surprised. “Does that mean that you've got doubts about Roberts?”

Austen said slowly: “No, not doubts, Owen, that's putting it too strongly, but there's something I don't quite like. There's a sort of warning at the back of my brain that it's not all so straightforward and simple as it looks.”

“But what makes you feel that?”

“Well, there's a thing I can't account for. It puzzles me and I don't like it. It's this: the first time I went to see Roberts, he didn't act like a guilty man. He was a bit nervous, at first, but even the most innocent people are apt to be that when they're questioned by the police. He got over

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that and became—well, self-assured is the only word I can find for it. One would have said that he was conscious of being innocent and so he'd no need to be frightened of anything."

"Murderer's conceit," Curtis suggested. "He believed he'd covered his tracks so well that he couldn't be found out."

"I don't think it was that. No, there was something and I can't put a name to it and it worries me, and even the second time I saw him, when he really was frightened, there was still some sort of conscious innocence in his manner—I can't get closer than that."

"Then why did he bolt? Why, if our guess is right, did he murder Percival?"

"Why? as you say. Still, this element of doubt—no, it's not exactly doubt, it's a question, but whatever it is it's in my mind, and, until we get hold of him and question him, I feel that we mustn't neglect our other two suspects."

"I rather thought that you'd crossed off Dr. Hentshell."

"I more or less had and then a few more facts about his character came to light and I'm going to have a talk with him."

"I haven't any great suspicions about Mrs. Trentham, but she undoubtedly had a motive and it won't hurt to put her through it again. Quite apart from her guilt or otherwise, she'll have been thinking a lot about Waring's party last Saturday, and she may have remembered something fresh which might help."

"And you'll see Hentshell?"

"Yes. It's better that I should, I think, because, if he had a motive for murdering Waring, it's a queer involved

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sort of academic jealousy mixed up with the sacred integrity of history, and as I know a bit about his subject, I know which angle to tackle him from."

"Sooner you than me, in that case," Curtis laughed. "Is that the end of our business talk?"

"I hope so. There's time for another drink. Same again?"

When they had lunched, they borrowed the local police car and drove to Oxford. Austen put Curtis down at the Trenthams' house and went on to the middle of the city and fortunately found a place to park in St. Giles. From there he walked to Hentshell's college, and found Hentshell in what could be called his natural surroundings, an exquisitely panelled room, looking out through casement windows, onto the green peace of the Quad below.

There were books everywhere, and, on the desk at which Hentshell was sitting, were stacks of manuscript.

He looked up in surprise at Austen's entrance.

"Mr. Austen," he queried, "What can I do for you?"

"Give me some of your time, Dr. Hentshell. I want to talk to you again on the subject of Professor Waring's death."

That seemed to surprise him even more.

"I have already told you the little I know," he said.

"Yes, and I have been thinking about it. Have you yet got what we might call his literary remains?"

"I obtained them last night."

"Have you looked at them yet?"

"Indeed I have."

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"What do you think of them? I mean, can they be published?"

"I think so. Yes, I think so. They will make a small volume of quite interesting reading for the layman. It will not be a work for scholars. The—the material is pleasantly written, but contains nothing whatever of value. What Waring was about, I cannot imagine. From my point of view, whatever work he put into it was a waste of time."

"No new material in it?"

"None. Merely a restatement, in simplified form, of the known facts. It could, I think, become quite a popular book among the partially educated, and, as such, may sell well. I hope so, for Miss Waring's sake."

He sounded, Austen felt, almost disappointed, as though he had hoped to find the work full of gross errors, which he could condemn.

"Supposing, for the sake of argument, Dr. Hentshell, that during Waring's lifetime, you had learnt that Waring was proposing to publish a book which you knew to be incorrect and misleading, what would you have done?"

A slow smile crossed the academic face. "I should have reasoned with him, of course."

"And if you had failed to convince him?"

"If he persisted in publishing, you mean? Then I should have made a point of exposing and condemning him by every possible means at my disposal."

And enjoyed it, Austen thought.

He said, aloud:

"You wouldn't have taken stronger measures?"

* Such as?"

"You wouldn't have considered getting rid of him?"

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Murdering him, in fact, to prevent his promulgating fallacies?"

The answer came sharply. "No. Certainly not. I might think that he would be better dead, but I should not take action myself. I am not the public hangman."

Austen left that and said: "It has been suggested to me, Dr. Hentshell, that your more than willingness to edit Waring's Mss. might have been due to a hope that you would find something new among his notes, which, you could use for yourself."

He saw Hentshell's fists tighten, but the reply, though emphatic, was deliberately spoken.

"My dear Sir, I never heard such nonsense. Waring's work has so deteriorated during the last year, that I should have been intensely surprised had he left any material of any value. Are you, by any misguided chance, trying to find reasons why I should have murdered him? The idea is absurd."

"You would have liked his Chair?"

"I don't deny it, but I shouldn't enjoy it if I had killed to get it."

"Will you assure me, categorically, that you know nothing about Waring's death?"

"I will. Except for the fact that he is dead, I have no knowledge of it. I did not kill him; I did not even wish to, and I know of no one who did."

When Austen and Curtis met again, they compared notes; the Inspector's interview had been as unfruitful as the Superintendent's.

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"I couldn't pin Mrs. Trentham down to anything," Curtis reported. "Her only preoccupation is to keep her name from being connected with Waring's. According to her, she doesn't know either who murdered him or who might have wanted to and she doesn't care. She's not afraid of being suspected, only of being implicated."

"We cross her off, do we?"

"In my opinion, yes."

"The same goes for Dr. Hentshell. On with the dance, then. Let Joy be unconfined. We must just sit and kick our heels until news of Roberts comes to hand."

The news was slow in coming. Flyte telephoned, late in the afternoon, to say that he thought he had a lead and was following it up.

The postman had said that he had only once had to redirect letters for Aubrey Roberts, and that had been to an address in London, which he didn't remember.

The charwoman was a little more helpful. She knew that her employer had some friends in Somerset whom he sometimes visited, but she couldn't be more explicit than that.

As Flyte's trail seemed to be taking him Westward, there wasn't much more to be done about it.

Austen was restless, waiting for results; No one who knew him less well than Curtis, would have realised it, probably, because there were no outward signs to betray him to a stranger. He always got like that towards the end of a

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case, more especially if he had any doubts as to whether he had made the right decision; whether he had let himself persuade himself that two and two made five.

So he sat smoking, and exchanging occasional remarks about nothing with Curtis, sometimes glancing at his watch; sometimes looking out of the window of the dull little room where he was sitting.

Then, at last, when the tension was uncomfortably mounting, things began to happen.

Inspector Harris came in, bringing a couple of letters which he put down in front of Austen.

"Roberts' afternoon post that you wanted, Sir. They've taken their time over letting us have it."

Austen grunted: "Yes," and opened a letter. It was a wine merchant's bill for two pounds sixteen.

He threw it down and opened the other and gave a sigh of relief as he saw the same decorated handwriting as had been on those damp scraps in Percival's kitchen.

'With quiet concentration he began to read.

"Darling Aubrey

Why are you being so cruel to me? I can't bear it. I shall go mad.

I phoned and told you that the awful police suspect that I killed Waring and I didn't know what to do. I told you that you *must* come and help me and you were so horrible and said I must look after myself, but you *must* come, Aubrey, you must.

You can tell me what to say, and, as I told you, if you don't, I shall *have* to tell them the truth. I'm desperate. How can you be so unkind after everything I've

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done for you. I've given you the best years of my life and you abandon me when I'm in trouble.

I know I'm only repeating what I said on the 'phone, but you didn't seem to realise how frightened I am. You said you'd always look after me and you *must*.

Your broken-hearted

Percival

Austen read it through a second time, then he handed it to Curtis, saying :

"Now I know what it was that was worrying me about Roberts."

Curtis read the letter, looking puzzled.

"What was it?" he asked.

Austen didn't answer that. Instead, he said, contemptuously: "I know who killed Waring, too."

"Roberts, of course," Curtis stated.

"No. Percival."

"How on earth d'you make that out?"

Austen smiled. "May I be mysterious, old chap? You know how I love springing my little surprises, and I'm not quite ready with this one yet."

"Theatrical idiot," said Curtis, affectionately laughing. "Have it your own way—you will, in any case."

Then a constable came to tell Austen that he was wanted on the telephone.

"I've found Roberts, Sir," said Flyte's voice.

"Good. Where are you speaking from?"

"Axbridge. It's in Somerset, about twenty miles beyond Bristol."

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"Near Cheddar Gorge?"

"Yes."

"I know it. Well?"

"He's gone to earth in a friend's house here."

"Do you think he intends to stay?"

"It sounds like it," Flyte sounded *very* pleased. "I got him through the taxi-driver who brought him. He reported that Roberts said to the friend who lives there: 'Richie, I'm in *such* a hole. Can I stay with you for a bit?' And the other chap said: 'As long as you like, dear boy,' or something, and there he is, just nicely waiting for me to go and pick him up."

"Did you have much of a job finding him?"

"He was pretty clever, Sir: dodged and doubled on his tracks like nobody's business, but he wasn't quite clever enough. He kept having to ask at stations and bus stops when the next train or bus went and I got him that way. What shall I do now? Bring him in?"

Austen thought for a second.

"Well, I think we'd better do the thing correctly—due regard to protocol and all that. You go and report to the local station that you've found a man who's wanted for questioning in a murder case, and I'll get Inspector Harris to ring them up and say his piece and ask for an escort. Then you can collect Roberts and bring him here."

Flyte was protestant. "I don't need an escort to bring that little rat along, Sir."

"Little rats can turn and bite when cornered, my lad. Besides, it's my car you're driving! I have a use for it—and for you, too, if it comes to that."

"As you say, Sir."

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"Get to it, then, and Flyte—"

"Sir?"

"I can't stand this place any longer; I'm going back to the Bear. I'll be there for the rest of the evening if I'm wanted. Let me know the minute you bring Roberts in."

He went back to Curtis and told him and Harris the gist of his conversation with Flyte, then he said:

"I think Curtis and I will go and get some dinner, Inspector. There's nothing more we can do here. If there are any calls for me, would you have them put through to the Bear?"

"Now," said Austen, when he and Curtis were comfortably settled at the bar of their hotel, "We have the evening before us, and if you dare to mention the word murder to me, I shall refuse to speak to you."

"What time do you suppose Flyte will be back?" Curtis wanted to know.

"I shall be surprised if we see him much before eleven."

"So we have several hours to fill in?"

"We have; and with your kind co-operation, my dear Owen, we will fill them profitably."

"Well, what do you mean by co-operation?"

Austen chuckled. "Probably not talking about crime. We'll discuss shoes and ships, if you don't mind, and things like that."

"Also I propose that we shall start with a drink. We've earned it. What's yours?"

When that was settled and the drinks before them, Aus-

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ten said: "We're going to have the best dinner the place can give us, too. We shall have plenty of time to enjoy it, without interruption, for once, so we'll do ourselves justice. I'm just going out to talk to the head waiter about it. Think of our poor Flyte, who'll be lucky if he gets a sandwich!" They wined and dined really well. Austen dearly loved good food and the meal had been chosen with care. Curtis, less knowledgeable though very appreciative, enjoyed himself exceedingly. Halfway through a superb salmi of duck à l'orange, he raised an ecstatic face and said: "I didn't know there was such food to be got in the villages of England."

"Mostly there isn't, and I think it's possibly our fault. You can't expect the village inn to produce it, naturally, but if a place of this kind can't, if we're willing to pay for it, probably we're to blame for not demanding that it should. However, that is a part of one of my other absorbing lectures, which I won't deliver now. In it, I explain that the English get what they're willing to take—and without a murmur, too."

He discoursed—there is no lesser word—all through dinner, on the subject of food as she is cooked, to Curtis's amusement and interest. He knew, perfectly well, that his friend was being subjected to a considerable strain, and to a condition which he found hard to bear—waiting—and was filling in the hiatus, for both of them, with inconsequent conversation.

When, quite late, they had finished dinner, and were sitting in the lounge with coffee and brandy, he tried to put some of his feelings into words.

"William," he said. "You have nattered nicely and

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I do appreciate it. You've made the time pass most pleasantly."

Austen reacted violently. "Good God, my dear chap! Have I bored you intolerably? You should have stopped me."

Curtis was judicial. "No, you were anything but boring, and, honestly, I'm grateful. I'm feeling a bit strained myself, not knowing what is the little surprise you're keeping up your sleeve. Anyway, you've managed to keep Aubrey Roberts and Percival Percival out of my mind for quite a time, and for that relief much thanks."

"And to you, for bearing with me. I was keeping them out of my mind, too, as you know, and all their works."

* * * * *

When Harris rang up to report that Flyte had arrived at the Station, with Roberts safely in tow Austen told him: "I'll be round at once; keep Roberts cooling, will you? If he says he wants a lawyer, tell him he can have one, and let him do any ringing up he wants—only make sure you listen to what he says."

* * * * *

He went back to Curtis.

"Now is the hour," he said. "'There is a tide in the affairs of men'—Owen, I'm nervous. I know what the truth is; I have hardly a fact to back it up, but if I play this properly, I'll get it out of Roberts."

Curtis laughed. "I believe you are *en veine*. Don't worry, William. Wade in and win."

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The police station felt chilly and deserted, though, actually it was anything but that.

The truth was that an aura of anticipation hung over it. Its inmates were quiet and subdued, because they had an instinct that momentous things were about to happen.

The room in which Inspector Harris, Sergeant Flyte and an anonymous P.C. up from Somerset, were waiting, in charge of Aubrey Roberts, was only warmed by the actual physical presence of its inmates.

It was lit by white-shaded electric bulbs, round which cigarette smoke swirled greyly, and under its light, queer shadows were thrown, and faces were robbed of colour and substance.

There was complete silence in the room; its occupants only smoked and said nothing.

Suddenly the door opened, and the voice of a local constable said: "Sergeant Flyte, wanted, please."

Flyte went out.

In the passage, beyond the door, Austen waited for him. For once, Austen showed his feelings, just a little.

"Robert," he said, "I'm glad to see you safely back." Then he took a breath and became impersonal again, though with an effort.

"You're safe and sound," he said. "Any trouble?"

Flyte, following in Master's Footsteps, clamped back his pleasure at Austen's concern for him.

"All present and correct, Sir," he reported, as unemotionally as he could, considering what he felt. "No trouble, no bother; the little who's-it came quietly."

"What were his reactions?" Austen wanted to know. "This is important, Robert. Did he say anything?"

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"He cried, Sir, *cried*, lots of dripping wet tears. All he said—and kept on saying it,—was 'I didn't do it! You can't pin it on me'."

"You didn't let him know, in any way, that you knew anything about Percival? You didn't even suggest that Percival was dead?"

"Not a breath! I don't think the poor creature's name was ever spoken, and most of the way, our Aubrey sobbed."

"That's important, Flyte," Austen said. "What, if you could gather it, was the sabbing about?"

"Just sheer bloody fright. 'Shall I be sent to prison?' 'What can they charge me with?' 'I don't know anything; why am I being treated like this?' All that kind of guff."

"But would you say that he's really scared?"

"And how, Sir. He's petrified and yet, I don't see of what."

* * * * *

Austen went back, then, followed by Flyte, who wasn't going to miss anything, to the cheerless room where the others were waiting for him.

He walked in, easily, quietly, and took up his stance with an effortless grace by the empty grate, one elbow on the mantelpiece, one hand holding his pipe.

The others made a gesture that Roberts should stand in his presence, but he quelled it.

"No. Let him sit," he said, softly.

He stood there, for appreciable seconds, looking at Aubrey Roberts, slumped in his chair, his face not merely colourless, like the others, but pasty and grey in the harsh light.

Then, as if from an infinite distance he spoke.

"Aubrey Roberts, you are guilty of two murders—"

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A high-pitched voice, almost a scream, broke into his words.

"I didn't do it! I swear I didn't do it! You can't prove it! I didn't!"

Austen waited long enough, before he answered, to let the denial echo round the room.

"Then who did?" he demanded, sternly.

"Percival! Can't you see it! He killed Jocelyn and he couldn't take it, so he killed himself?"

The silence in the room was almost frightening.

Austen asked, after a second, his voice edged. "And who told you that Percival was dead?"

Even Aubrey realised that he answered too quickly there.

"But he told me he was going to," he said hysterically. "He telephoned me and said that he couldn't bear his guilt and he was going to kill himself because the police suspected him."

"Did he?" Austen asked, very quietly. "I suggest that what happened, Roberts, is that Percival rang you up and told you that you must help him, must clear him of Waring's murder. or he would tell the truth—to *me*."

Slowly, word by word, Aubrey, shocked and startled out of caution, said, in an awe-stricken voice: "How did you know?"

Then William Austen knew that his instincts were right, his guesses had come true.

He looked at Curtis, his friend, almost with triumph, before he said, deliberately:

"Aubrey Roberts, I know all about this. I know how you

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murdered Jocelyn Waring, thinking that you hadn't done one thing which could be brought home to you.

"It was so simple, wasn't it? You nursed the pinion that impelled the steel, but you, so comfortably, just stood and watched.

"I'll tell you what happened. Last Saturday morning, you went to the party that Waring gave then. He was so provocative, so insulting to you, that you could have killed him, there and then if you'd had the means.

"But you hadn't. You had, at home, though; that barbiturate you'd left, thinking, I expect, that it would come in useful, sometime.

"Waring had asked you to bring a friend along, to his party in the evening, so you brought your poor little innocent stodge, Percival, all intent and keen on knowing the Great Man."

"Well," said Aubrey, defiantly. "What's wrong with that? Percival had always wanted to know Jocelyn—"

"Yes, but you briefed him before you went to that party; you said words to the effect of: 'Percival, Waring has been terribly rude to me; he's made fun of me and of people like you and me. I want to pay him out and you can help me do it'."

Fear came into Aubrey Roberts' face then, as of one who hears a voice from the grave.

"Did Percival tell you?" he almost whispered.

Austey ignored that, and went on with his reconstruction, which he would have been the first to have admitted, was solely a matter of inspiration—and guess work—founded on a good solid basis of applied psychology.

He said: "You gave Percival a small phial filled with

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barbitone out of the capsules which had been prescribed for you, and told him to slip it into Waring's glass when he got the chance. You made Percival think that it was an emetic, or something like that, which would humiliate Waring in front of his guests, and be a suitable revenge for the humiliations which Waring had imposed on you."

Aubrey Roberts sank further into his chair. He was no longer even the semblance of a man, only the shell of a human being with no pretensions to humanity. Naked fear was in his eyes as of one in the presence of the Omniscient. It had never occurred to him that anyone could see into his mind.

Austen went on: "You knew you hoped—that that would kill Waring and that he could never humiliate you again.

"Then Waring died, as you had intended, and when I saw you, you were confident that you could never be accused of his murder because *you hadn't given him yourself* the dose which killed him. You'd forgotten that the accessory before the fact is as culpable as the person he incites.

"Then Percival saw how you'd involved him and got into a panic—most understandably—and you repudiated him.

"You told him that he must look after himself.

"Suddenly you realised that he had been driven, partly by you, partly by his own fears, to a state when he couldn't be trusted to keep quiet. An instant's more pressure from me, for instance, and he couldn't help telling what he knew—telling how you had persuaded him to commit what you'd persuaded him was a harmless, practical joke—which turned out to be murder.

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"And so you went to see your poor little cat's paw—and you took with you the last remnant of the barbitone you'd hoarded. It wasn't enough to kill, but it was enough to send Percival to sleep, and, while he slept, you turned on the gas fire so that his sleep became an endless one."

"But still you could chant your parrot cry: 'I didn't kill Waring.'"

"Yes, that's true. With your own hands, you didn't. You could, you thought, face me with an easy conscience. You didn't kill Waring. But you ~~as~~ surely killed him as if you, and not your poor devoted dupe, had put that deadly dose into his glass."

Roberts, stunned under the weight of accusation which he knew to be fact, hardly even attempted to speak. Everything about him, down to the hopeless way in which he slumped in his chair, his eyes staring at Austen as if at Nemesis, betrayed his guilt. He was lost, lost. There was no help, no comfort anywhere. Austen was the avenging angel, without mercy, who knew all.

He stammered at last, feebly: "You don't know it's true! You can't prove it! You're guessing!"

William Austen looked at him. "That is what happened," he said. "I have the letter which Percival wrote to prove it."

He passed the letter to him, but Aubrey Roberts made no attempt to take it.

Instead he collapsed. "I didn't mean it to happen that way," he sobbed, weakly, "but Percival let me down. I couldn't trust him. He—he had to go. I didn't—I didn't think it would be like this. I never thought you'd guess. But I *didn't* kill Waring!"

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Austen looked at him, with all the contempt and disgust he felt written in his fine face.

"There are two crimes at your door," he said, coldly. "Two of the meanest, most despicable murders it has been my lot to meet. I think if I were you, I should be glad to meet my fate to pay for them both, to expiate, as you surely will, for the betrayal of a friend."

* * * * *

Austen slept very little, after that last, infinitely distressing scene, but when he got up in the morning, he felt a sense of relief and completion. At least the job was done.

He went, midway through the morning, to see Juliet Waring.

"I've come to say goodbye," he said. "My work here is over; the murder of your husband is solved."

Her face showed her relief. "Oh! How thankful I am. Who did it?"

He told her all about it, then, and she listened in amazement.

When he had finished, she said: "I can't be sorry that it's Aubrey Roberts."

"No. He deserves all he will get. Now, I must go, but I'd like to wish you a happy future."

She put out her hand. "Thank you. I believe I shall achieve one. And, Mr. Austen, if ever you come this way again, stop and see me—as a friend."